THE SHORT STORY MAGAZINE

ARGOSY

OCTOBER, 1957

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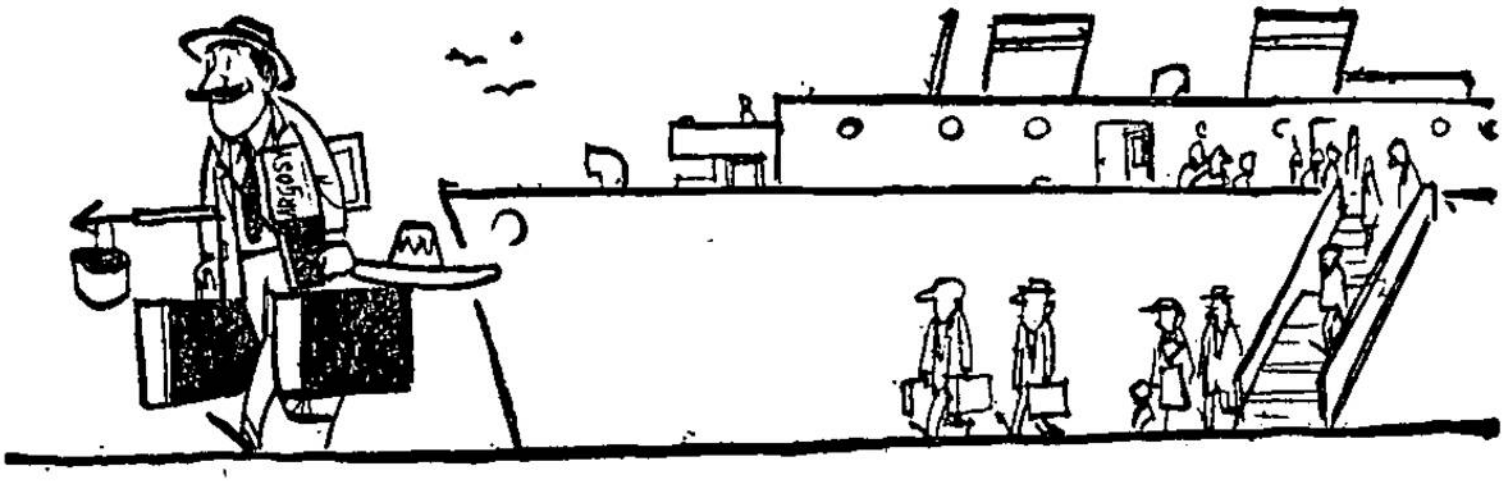

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ARGOSY

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Log Book

ANY Argosy reader who has suddenly found himself wanting to dispose of, say, a pair of rhinoceros horns, will know that the proper procedure is not to advertise in a newspaper or put up a card in the local stationer's but to buy a copy of an exchange magazine and there scrutinize the comparative advantages of objects offered.

Glancing through a recent issue we found that rhinoceros horns were fetching good prices; that a macabre coffee-house was asking for skeletons, coffins, and an intercom system; that photographs of D-Day landings were fetching one-and-six apiece; and that a cello case and bows were offered in exchange for an igloo or pneumatic tent.

Several features of the advertisements puzzled us: what, for example, made one advertiser decide that he must immediately, at all costs, get rid of eight pied exhibition budgerigars and procure a 12-bore shotgun *or* a camera? We could understand it if he just wanted to get rid of the birds. Maybe their incessant chirping is driving him scatty. We could enter into his feelings if he desperately needed the gun to shoot his mother-in-law and is prepared to part with his precious birds in a good cause. It's the alternative of the camera that gets us brooding.

Then again, we can understand that anybody might want an m.l.gun late owned by a Duke; we can share the outlook of someone wishing to exchange a fair-sized oo model railway for a baby washing-machine, since life is, after all, a serious affair; but why is an advertiser offering to swop handcuffs, leg-irons, and a Yogi costume for a portable typewriter, duplicating paper, and ink? Has he discovered the truth about the Mysterious Beyond, and is he now going to write a bestseller on his experiences?

We were baffled, too, by the inscrutable abbreviation w.h.y.

that appeared in many ads, as, here: *Sale or exchange road breaker tools, interested arc welder, spray plant, w.h.y. Buyer collects.*

We don't know w.h.y. is all we can say to that; they seem queer things to collect. What a fascinating life one of these advertisers must lead. " Darling," he says to his wife at breakfast, " I think I'll get rid of the five gross of jazz-coloured balloons in the attic. I've always fancied a wine-making set. Or would you rather have a tiger's head and two whale teeth? "

But the missus, who has nothing to read with *her* marmalade, snarls, " I notice you don't propose to get rid of all those back numbers of Argosy in the front room. And why haven't you brought home the new one yet? " W.h.y. not indeed?

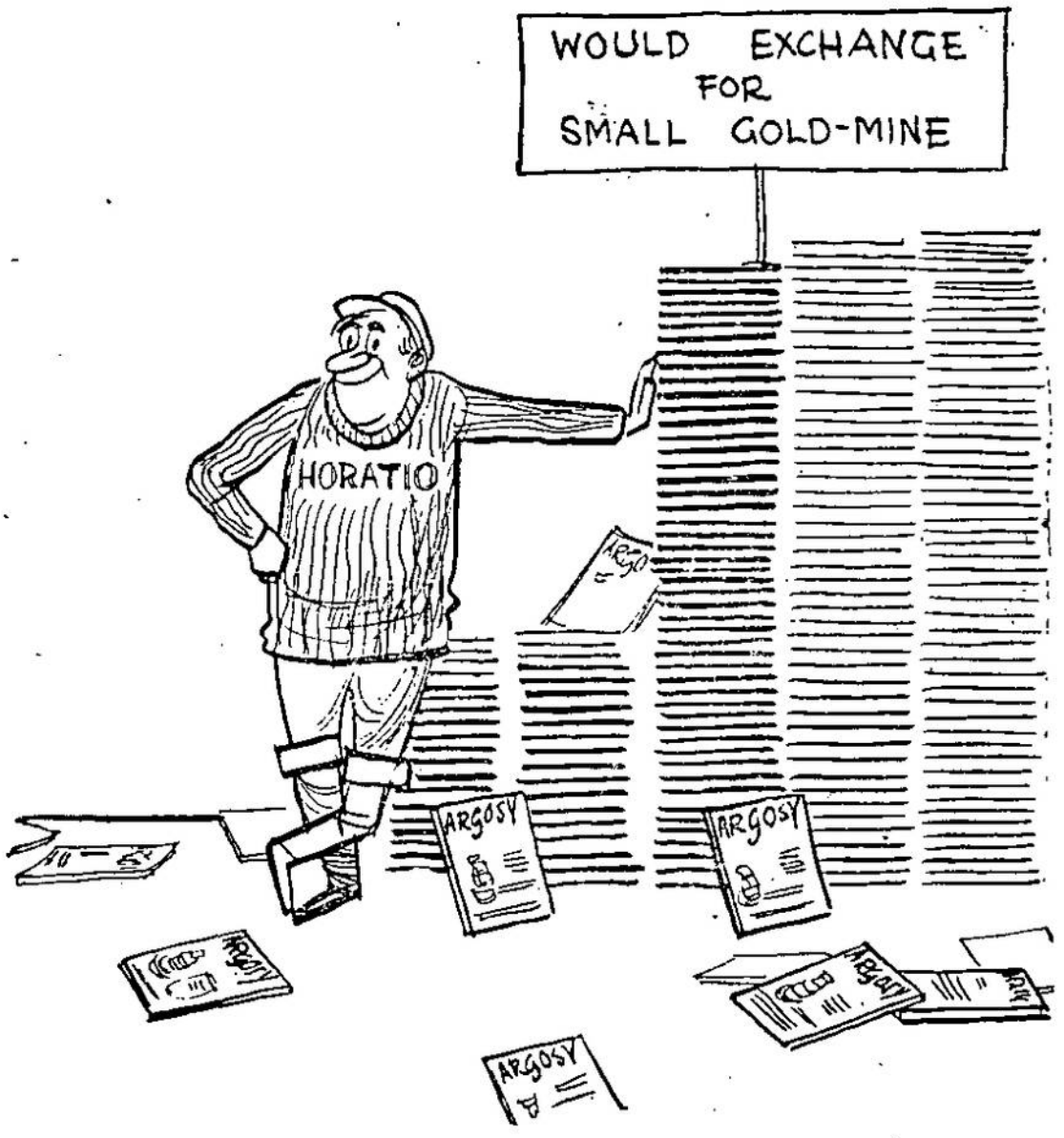
Holly Roth is American, of Hungarian descent. She was born in Chicago, often came to England in her teens, accompanying her father on his business trips. Married at twenty, widowed at twenty-one, she had a tough time in the Depression and says she worked on newspapers and trade journals all over the upper half of the United States, and did spells of clothes-modelling and proof-reading. When times improved she had four years with a publishing company, then became an associate editor of Cosmopolitan magazine. The first fiction she wrote was *The Content Assignment*; six weeks after she'd written it, she had sold the serial rights to an American weekly magazine and an English

national daily; two publishers, American and English, simultaneously snapped it up, and it became a book-guild selection and, later, a paperback. Her other novels have been equally successful; her fifth, *Shadow of a Lady*, will soon be out in this country.

Christopher Landon this month contributes another story about the wily Mullah, in which the term pot-luck assumes a new significance. Landon, who was educated at Lancing, Clare College, Cambridge, and Guy's Hospital, went on the Stock Exchange after failing his second M.B. Ten years later he retired and bought a pub in Devon; turned to writing during an illness, having exhausted the resources of the local public library.

Robert W. Krepps's literary career was interrupted by work in the palaeontology lab of a museum, also by a spell as beer-refrigeration salesman, and another as an advertising layout and copy-man. He had some experience as a ghost-author, as a farm hand, and in a meat-packing factory. In 1946 he settled to full-time writing; he has produced three novels. He likes to write about Africa, has a beautiful wife, collects pipes, books, and records; will gladly stop work at any time for good food, cats, or conversation.

JOHN SILVER



A PATRICK PETRELLA STORY

DEATH WATCH

In the still blackness he heard it
—a small rackety click

BY MICHAEL GILBERT

DURING his tour of duty at Highside, Detective Sergeant Petrella encountered quite a number of memorable people, but he never remembered anyone quite like Judge Vereker.

James Vereker was an official of the Colonial Service and had held judicial office in Palestine, in Kenya and, more recently, in Cyprus. He was a small, cheerful, birdlike person who dragged a club-foot behind him, and possessed the whole of a right hand and part of a left hand—the missing fingers had been blown off by an ingenious greetings telegram sent him on his fiftieth birthday, by Irgun Zvai Leumi. Vereker was a bachelor; which may have been as well in all the circumstances. When Petrella encountered him, he was under sentence of death.

The Judge told him so himself, perched on the fender seat in his cosy, second-storey flat in the new block on Heath Hill, while Petrella sat, ill at ease, in the single armchair.

"They're an offshoot—a sort of foreign working party—of Anorthotikou Komonia Ergezonienou Laou. That's really another name for the local communist party."

"Just why should they want to kill you, sir?"

"Expediency," said the Judge. "Of course, that's not what they say. The ostensible reason is revenge. I sentenced one of their members, George Antinas, to death for terrorism. They made a terrific fight to save him. It was last year. You may have read about it."

Petrella nodded. Like everyone else in England, he had read about it. Half the press had made out that George, who had spent most of his life in England, was a young William Tell; the other half had presented him as a vicious paid assassin. Overpaid, apparently, for he had badly bungled his last job, which was

the blowing-up of a police station, and had fallen alive into the hands of the men he had set out to destroy.

"My own theory," said Judge Vereker, "is that the whole thing had precious little to do with politics. George's employers had got tired of him. Both he and his brother, Antar, were wild young men, and not always discreet. So they sent George on this job—but tipped off the police in advance. Thus they had the best of both worlds. George was abated; and they got themselves a useful martyr."

"I should have thought they had enough martyrs already," said Petrella.

"Timing," said the Judge. "They want an up-to-date martyr. One they can use right now. As I said, it's purely a question of expediency. If they succeed in murdering me, in some spectacular way, in the next few weeks, it will strengthen the hands of the extremists on both sides. By November I should guess the best time for them will be over."

He stroked his tortoiseshell cat with his sound hand. He might, Petrella thought, have been talking about oysters coming in and going out of season.

"Who are they?" said Petrella.

"The leader is, I think, an Egyptian. His animosity against this country has nothing to do with recent events. I doubt if he harbours animosity. He is a professional terrorist, and his present name is David. Incidentally he is one of the finest amateur conjurers in the world."

David, noted Petrella, *conjurer*.

"If he is working with his usual number two, that will be Stefanos, a Greek engineer, who specializes in electrical devices."

"Stefanos," said Petrella. "Electrician. And the third?"

"Oh, the third, I should think, would be George's brother, Antar. There would be a truly Hellenic touch of poetic justice in that, don't you think? Also, Antar, like George, was brought up in England and looks and speaks like an Englishman. That could be useful to them in their operations."

As Petrella sat, some days later, in the porter's cubicle, watching the clock with one eye and the main door with the other, he was thinking of David and Stefanos and Antar, implacable figures of Grand Guignol. David with his long, strong, conjurer's fingers. Stefanos with his engineer's skill; and Antar—Antar who might appear in any form at any moment, beneath some commonplace mask, a brother's blood crying out for vengeance.

They were known to be in England. The Special Branch had confirmed it. And they were thought to be operating from the

area of the docks where they had friends. But, apart from that, there was nothing but speculation.

A quarter to midnight. The last pubs had shut some time before and thrown their noisy contingents into the streets. In eight and a quarter hours' time, Petrella's relief would arrive, and he could go home and sleep. Ten hours was a long spell, when you couldn't relax for a minute of it.

Heath Hill Mansions was not a difficult fortress to defend. It was a great deal easier than a private house. The Judge had a flat on the second storey of the annexe. Underneath him, on the ground floor, lived a South African dentist. Above the dentist a woman journalist, above the journalist the Judge, and above the Judge a practising faith healer. All the tenants had been there considerably longer than the Judge; and all had been carefully and unostentatiously checked, with the result that the faith healer was now strongly suspected of being a receiver of stolen goods. Such were the unexpected by-products of criminal investigation.

A single main staircase led to the flats, and ended in a front hall conveniently commanded by the porter's cubby-hole, in which Petrella sat watching the clock. This part of the block was L-shaped; and in the angle of the L at the back was a small walled courtyard, the gate to which was locked at night. In ordinary times an iron fire-escape staircase led up from this courtyard to the backdoors of the flats; but, by arrangement, the bottom section of it was removed at night. After all, as Superintendent Haxtell pointed out, there was very little chance of a fire starting undetected if they had a policeman actually on the premises.

What else, thought Petrella. There was a goods hoist beside the back staircase, which was locked during the hours of darkness, and was in any event far too small for the smallest terrorist to use. And to baulk assault from the roof with packets of explosive swung from cords—a method developed in Palestine—a fine wire mesh had been fixed across all the windows of the Judge's flat.

A car—no, not a car, a heavy lorry—rumbled past the end of the road, slowed for a moment, then changed its mind, and went on, picking up speed.

Could any precautions be effective against determined, accomplished killers? Were there not a dozen ways into the fortress, even without physical access? The vegetables, the groceries, the milk. All carefully examined, it was true. Likewise the letters and parcels, the books from the library, the shirts from the laundry.

But the men they were up against were ingenious and ruthless.

They had learnt the art of secreting a damaging charge of explosive in a minimum of space. Petrella thought of the story the Judge had told him of the Inspector of Constabulary, who had lived in a similar state of siege for three months in Haifa. And how, in the end, Irgun had bribed or terrorized the local cobbler, and repaired his shoes with hollow heels full of explosive which had blown both his legs off the first time the Inspector wore them. Or the case of the Governor's bodyguard, whose ammunition pouches had been filled with explosive timed to go off at the moment when the Governor was inspecting them; a plan which had failed because the Governor, on this occasion and most unusually, was two minutes late.

"I can tell you an even sadder story," Judge Vereker had said, swinging his legs and looking like a mischievous boy. "About my predecessor in Cyprus. It was not a story which received any publicity. AKEL had sworn to kill him. He was closely guarded, more closely than I am here. Perhaps too closely. You must always preserve a sense of proportion in these matters. It lasted for three months. By the end of that time, AKEL had made no move. But they had succeeded."

Judge Vereker paused, and added, "Poor fellow. He went mad. I saw him the other day. He's a little better now, but he'll never be much use. The slightest unexpected sound or movement makes him scream." That, thought Petrella grimly, was a type of assault that was very unlikely to succeed in this case.

He guessed that at that moment Judge Vereker was sleeping soundly. A lot more soundly than the anxious policemen who were trying to guard him, or, for that matter, than the men who were working to destroy him.

Funny—what was that?

A faint, scintillating light had appeared, over the trees and bushes in the strip of park that ran along the closed end of the road. If it had been the fifth of November he would have written it down as a cheap firework. It rose, dipped, and went out. Nothing else happened.

One o'clock. A dog barked. Then another. He heard footsteps coming along the next street. Two pairs of feet. They stopped at the corner, and then the voices started. Too low to determine sex. Much too low to hear what was being said. One was insisting, Petrella thought, the other protesting.

The voices stopped abruptly, and the footsteps came on. Peering through the open front door, Petrella saw them. A man and a girl by their silhouettes. They reached the porch two doors away, and the footsteps stopped and the voices started again, louder this time.

They were just outside the range of his comprehension, but the cadences were clear enough. The man insisting, repeating. The girl saying no. No. No.

Suddenly they broke off. There was a muffled scuffling noise. A cry. Then the man slipped out of the porch, turned his head for a quick look up and down the road, and took to his heels.

Behind him, from the porch, came a little sobbing moan, and the girl staggered after him. Took two paces, stumbled, and went down on her knees in the middle of the road. Clutched her stomach, and pitched forward and sideways onto her face.

" He's done her," said Petrella. His hands were on the door. He jerked it open, and his foot was actually lifted to go through, when reason took charge of instinct.

Anyone watching Petrella at that moment would have seen something as shocking as a car that is rolling forward being thrown suddenly into reverse. For a count of seconds, he stood quite still. The girl lay motionless in the road, the lamp casting a pool of light round her. Then Petrella moved, like one released from a spell.

Very slowly his hand unfolded, and he let the door swing shut. Very slowly and very softly he walked back into the porter's cubicle, picked up the telephone, and dialled a number.

" Police," he said. " It's Detective Sergeant Petrella. On duty at Heath Hill Mansions. There's been some trouble. Out in the street. A girl's been hurt."

The other end of the telephone said something.

" Yes," said Petrella. " I thought so, too. Perhaps if you closed both ends of the street. Just in case." He replaced the receiver and, almost on tiptoe, walked back to the street door.

As he stood there, for the second time that night, a faint glimmering light arose, over the line of bushes at the end of the road, hung for a moment, and disappeared.

In the succeeding blackness and stillness he heard a sound, small but distinct.

It came from behind him. From the courtyard at the back.

He ran across the hallway and jerked at the backdoor. It refused to budge. He put his shoulder to it, but realized that he was wasting his time. The door was built to open inwards.

Quickly. Think quickly. He pressed the doorbell of the ground-floor flat. Almost at once the door was opened. The South African dentist was wearing a dressing-gown. He seemed surprisingly wide awake.

" Trouble? " he said.

" I don't know," said Petrella. " Would you stand here a

minute? Shout if anything happens. There'll be a squad car along any moment."

"Sure," said the dentist. "Sure."

Petrella ran past him, into the kitchen, and snapped on the light. The backdoor of this flat also opened on the court. It was bolted, but when he had slipped the bolt it swung open.

The light from the kitchen window lit up the little enclosed space. It was quite empty. Petrella had had visions of a ladder spanning the missing section of the fire escape, but there was nothing at all. And all the upper windows were dark.

He went out cautiously. A wire, he discovered, had been passed through the handle of the door that led into the hall, and secured to a window bar opposite. And the back gate into the street behind swung open to his touch.

Petrella walked thoughtfully back into the kitchen, bolting the door carefully behind him. He found the stout dentist on guard.

"Here come your chaps," he said.

It was Superintendent Haxtell, who must have been sleeping in his clothes. "Where's the girl-friend?"

Petrella peered out into the street, lit now by the powerful spotlight of the police car. It was empty.

"We had both ends of the street blocked within three minutes of your phone call," said Haxtell. "She moved pretty quick for a dead girl."

"It was a put-up job, all right," said Petrella.

He told him what had happened, and they went back into the courtyard.

"We'd better move the wire," said Haxtell. "We'll leave the rest as it is. The boys may get something out of it in the morning."

They thanked the dentist, who observed that it had been quite an evening.

"What do you think it was all about?" said Haxtell as they stood together in the hall.

"Plainly," said Petrella, "they expected me to run out and help the girl. I don't know what was next on the bill. Possibly they planned to cosh me as I was bending over her. They had the backdoor ready wired, so something quite elaborate was planned to happen in the yard. Maybe a ladder up to the start of the fire-escape. And they'd have had a shot at breaking in through the Judge's kitchen. It wouldn't be easy. The backdoor's locked and bolted and the windows are barred and wired."

"Maybe," said Haxtell. "What about the fireworks?"

"Some sort of signal?"

"Signal of what?"

Petrella considered the matter. "Suppose," he said, "that they had the telephone from the flat tapped. Somewhere down the road. The first signal would be to start operations. The second would mean, 'Break it off. He hasn't fallen for it and he's telephoned for reinforcements. Get out quick.'"

"Could be," said Haxtell. He was still worried. What he really wanted to do was to go up and see if the Judge was all right. But he realized that it might be difficult to wake up a sleeping man simply to explain that something was going on which he couldn't understand himself.

In the end he said, "All right. Keep your eyes open," and drove away.

Petrella was troubled, too, but about something else. He was trying to place the noise that he had heard, in the darkness, after the second light signal. At first he had thought that it was the back gate of the courtyard. He even went out and tried opening and shutting it, but he couldn't induce it to make the right sort of noise—a rackety click.

He was still worrying about it as the sky paled and the light came back and a new day hauled itself sluggishly over the horizon.

At seven o'clock the milkman arrived. He had, besides the milk, a box of fresh eggs, butter, and two loaves of bread for the Judge. Petrella knew him well by now. Nevertheless he went through the careful routine of search, even unwrapping and piercing each loaf with a steel needle.

"Wooden' like to search the eggs as well?" suggested the milkman, who was a cheerful young cockney.

"That's enough of that," said Petrella. "You can send 'em up."

The Judge, who was an early riser, used to take the stuff in himself and cook his own breakfast. His daily woman wasn't due till nine. Petrella was just reflecting, with pleasure, that by nine o'clock he would be safely in bed himself, when he heard the noise again.

Unmistakably, the same rackety click.

He jumped to the backdoor and jerked it open. Outside, the courtyard was empty. The milkman had gone. Nothing moved. It came again, above his head this time. Then he saw the wheel rotating and the wire running. It was the goods lift going slowly upwards.

Time stood still.

Then Petrella was in the passenger lift, the sweat pouring off him in a steady stream. First floor, second floor. And he was

pelting down the passage. He placed a finger on the bell and kept it there.

After an eternity the door opened and Judge Vereker looked out.

"Why, Sergeant—"

"Have you lifted them out?" croaked Petrella.

"Lifted what?"

"I'm sorry." Petrella recovered his breath and his heart stopped pounding. "The stuff that was coming up in your service lift?"

"As a matter of fact, I'd just opened it when you rang."

"But you hadn't touched anything?"

"No. It looked all right to me, though."

"The stuff's all right," said Petrella. "I examined it myself. It's the lift. They tampered with it last night."

As he spoke they were walking into the tiny, spotless kitchen. The doors of the service lift stood open, and the cardboard box of groceries lay where the milkman had placed it.

Petrella said, "Have you got a torch?"

The Judge hobbled off to his bedroom. When he came back with the torch Petrella said, "It's right, isn't it, that no one else can use this lift while your doors are open?"

"Quite right," said the Judge. "That tiresome woman in the flat underneath once went away for the weekend and left hers open. What's the catch?"

Petrella was on one knee, shining the torch through the tiny gap between the bottom of the lift box and the top of the boarding.

"There's something there," he said. "I'm going to get help on this. If we leave the doors open and the lift where it is, it can't hurt us."

He went into the Judge's sitting-room, and dialled a number which is not in the telephone book. A bored voice said, "Heath Hill Mansions. No. 27. All right. We'll send a car round straight away."

Five minutes later a man in a raincoat, carrying a heavy bag of tools, and looking like a superior plumber, had arrived and introduced himself as Sergeant Oliphant.

"Is it safe to watch?" said the Judge. "Or do you want us to clear out?"

"Safe enough now you've spotted it," said Oliphant. "Neat, though. Very neat." He got a long steel rod with a tiny light bulb at the end of it out of his bag, and inserted it under the lift.

"Care to look?" he said.

Petrella saw that three solid-looking blocks of some dark toffee-like substance had been clamped to the underside of the

box. Oliphant took a thin pair of pliers, slid them in, and snipped twice.

" Clever, really," he said.

He lifted off the box of groceries, and as he did so the whole floor of the lift rose for a fraction of an inch then checked.

" They've slipped in a double floor. See? The sort of thing you get in a passenger lift. Spring loaded. The weight of those groceries would be quite enough to keep it down. That makes an electrical contact. When you lifted the box off, you'd touch off the stuff underneath. About six pounds of gelignite, I should say. Do you no good at all. By the way, how did they know your man'd be the first to use it? "

" He had a special early delivery," said Petrella. " Every morning."

" Great mistake," said Oliphant, " if you don't mind me saying so. Never do things the same every day. Not with these types. It's playing into their hands. I'll get up the steamer from the car and disinfect this lot."

Petrella stood for a moment, listening to Oliphant's footsteps disappearing down the passage. He felt both breathless and deflated. Then he was aware that the Judge was speaking. " I notice," he said, " that our friend has left his tool bag behind. I think we'd better get moving."

Petrella stared.

The Judge gripped his arm. " There's really no time to waste," he said urgently. " Come on! " The next minute they, too, were out in the passage, and running.

" Down the stairs," said the Judge. " This'll do. You won't catch him now."

Together they flopped down on the stairs. Two floors below them a door slammed and they heard a car start. Then all sounds were blotted out in the solid roar from the flat they had just left.

Petrella raised his nose from the stair carpet. His ears were singing. Fragments of plaster were still dropping from the ceiling and the air was full of dancing dust.

" How did you know that that man was a fake? " said Petrella.

" It was Antar," said the Judge. " I recognized him as soon as he came in. He's very like his brother."

" Why didn't you tell me? "

" He had a gun. Neither of us had. It seemed safer to let him think he'd got away with it."

" The tool bag was full of explosive."

" With a very short time fuse, yes."

" How did he know—" Petrella started. And then stopped.

He was asking himself questions to which he knew the answer: " Of course. They had the telephone line tapped. It was a double precaution, in case we spotted the lift."

" They're very persistent people," said the Judge. " I expect they'll get me in the end. You'd better go and comfort our lady journalist. By the sound of it, she's having hysterics."

★ ★ ★

ABOUT FACE!

" But my face—I don't mind it Because I'm behind it ; It's the folks out in front that I jar "—so runs the limerick, and certainly not all the following are beauties. But each has some distinguishing feature if you look closely. Don't be put out of countenance—answers are on p. 85.

1. *Whose was the face that launched a thousand ships?*

2. *Whose ear started a war?*

3. *" If the nose of —— had been shorter the whole face of the earth would have been changed."*
Whose nose? And who said it?

4. *How many eyes had i. Polyphemus*
ii. Argus.

5. *Who wore a gold nose? And where is there a brass one on the gate?*

6. *Perhaps the most outstanding contemporary proboscis is that of Schnozzle Durante—but who was called Nose Almighty in his day?*

7. *Take an eyeful of Medusa and what would happen to you?*

ARGOSY COMPETITION

The essential article on a journey? Readers were prolific in their suggestions—plastic mugs, anaesthetics, banjos, flasks, elastic, pills, roller skates, all had their advocates. Many readers echoed John Pitt's lyrical claim—

" When I fly, Up in the sky,
A ' must ' for me—Is Argosy."

We are dividing our two-guinea prize between Mr. G. W. Spinks, Charlton, London, who discards literature in favour of an indispensable wife, and Brigadier E. E. Nott-Bower, Colyford, Devon. Honourable mention to Susan Godley—

" Sans Argosy, ennuyés, nous
N'irons en vacances plus."

Argosy au gratin, we call that.

JOBBONUTS

In thirty-five years I had never seen a single pink elephant

BY CLIVE BURNLEY

TWO years ago this September I was driving home along A414 from Hertford to Chelmsford, about noon, in full sunlight, when a car in front of me vanished. One moment it was there; the next the road was empty.

This was a very great shock to me. I braked rather stiffer than I should have done and went sideways onto the grass verge. I sat there parked, trying to figure it out, and the hedge and the trees and the notice about building-land for sale looked as solid as stereoscopic vision could make them. In thirty-five years I had never seen a single pink elephant or even a parlour ghost made out of butter muslin; with me, seeing had always been believing.

Then someone came up behind me on a motor cycle, saw me with my nose in the hedge, stopped, and gave me a very direct kind of look before he spoke. He had a large and chunky body under his sports coat and corduroys, and a sharp and cagey face atop of it. I recognized the look and the build and I said at once, " Don't tell me—you're a police officer."

" You're quite right," he told me. " What's gone wrong here?"

" The natural laws of the universe," I said.

" I don't have to enforce those," he said. " Are you telling me you were pushed off the road by an earthquake or something? "

" Worse than that," I told him.—" There was a car in front of me and it just *went*. Vanished. A phantom car. It looked as real as you do and then it simply disappeared. Right before my eyes, not three yards away. I was so surprised I went into the hedge."

" That's a new one," he said. " Let's have a look at the whites of your eyes."

" Oh, it isn't that," I protested.

" All right, then," he said after a scrutiny. " Pull out and drive on. But you'd better watch how you go."

I got rather annoyed. " Look here," I said, " I'm a law-abiding, rate-paying citizen making a report of a highly suspicious

occurrence and it's your duty to take my name and address and make a note in your book. I insist on it."

"It's suspicious, right enough," he agreed, "but not the way you mean. Well, tell me again."

"This car," I said. "It was one of those new Cornish Autoflow jobs, bright red. I can even give you its number. I noticed it because the initials were the same as mine—ADD 27—and 27's the first half of my phone number. I tell you it was right in front of me doing about forty-five and it vanished. Absolutely went into thin air."

"This is a psycho job," he said. "Your initials, your telephone number. It's just narcissism, that's all. If you often have delusions like this, you oughtn't to be on the road at all."

"There's no need to start calling me names," I said. "And it wasn't driven by a headless chauffeur, but by a man with ginger hair in a blue check suit."

"And he disappeared too, I suppose?"

"Entirely and instantly. And if he was a delusion, so are you."

"Show me your licence," he said. And in the end, with a very bad grace, he did make some sort of entry in his notebook.

The very next day he came to my office.

"Detective Constable Cassell to see you," said Miss Jenkins, and I had him shown in.

"That phantom car," he began.

"Oh that," I said uncomfortably. "Well, I don't want to find myself in Broadmoor just because of a touch of sunstroke. I've been thinking it over and I suppose it must have been what they call a subjective phenomenon. If you hadn't caught me just when you did I'd have kept it to myself, anyway."

"Would you, now?" said Cassell. "I don't know whether it would surprise you to know that a civil engineer from Sawbridgeworth has gone missing in a red Cornish Autoflow, registration number ADD 27. Reported at 1.30 a.m. this morning. Had ginger hair, too. Did you ever know a man called Llewellyn Lloyd-Marshall?"

"No. I'm against the colour bar but I have a little private hate against the Welsh. I don't know quite why. Was he the man in the Autoflow?"

"He was. We've checked the morgues but there's no trace yet. He'll probably turn up. If he doesn't you'll have a lot of explaining to do. Let's have your story over again, from the beginning."

So I told him, and he went.

But two days later he came to my house in the evening.

"Found him?" I asked.

" If we had," he answered, " I shouldn't be here. I want to know where you met Llewellyn Lloyd-Marshall."

" I only saw him that one time," I said. " Just for a second before he vaporized."

Cassell gave me the treatment, as close to the third degree as the constabulary are permitted. I could see that he was deeply suspicious of me. Perhaps he thought the Cornish Autoflow had risen up before me like Banquo's ghost before Macbeth, the product of a guilty conscience.

The next afternoon I met him by appointment in the Pineapple, and he led the way to the Lloyd-Marshall residence in Sawbridgeworth. Two of the family at least were still solid flesh, particularly the widowed mother, who rather ran to bosom, but the missing man's sister, Blodwen, made me revise my theories about the Welsh. She was dark and nimble and lovely. Neither of them had seen me before, nor I them.

" Perhaps it was second sight," said Blodwen.

I shook my head. " I'm no part of the Celtic twilight; I'm earthbound English. But what I saw I saw."

After that I saw Cassell rather frequently.

I believe he tried to keep a general eye on me, perhaps hoping that one of these days I would try to sell him a Cornish Autoflow. It's even possible that he suspected me of murder. All the same, we grew quite friendly in a way, and now and again we used to have a drink together in the Pineapple.

The unnatural craziness of the thing had worried his logical cop's mind from the beginning, and when suddenly it got twice as crazy as before, I was the first person he came to. This was early in October.

I was dictating a letter at ten o'clock one morning when he came bursting in, probably using the technique they taught at Hendon for raiding opium dens, looking untidier than usual and frightening Miss Jenkins out of her wits, which takes some doing.

He loomed haggardly over my desk and said, " He's come back."

I knew what he meant, of course. " Jolly good show," I said. " Now perhaps I can leave the records without a stain on my character."

" He's come back," said Cassell, " and he's mad. Come and see. He's quite mad."

The man wanted help, I realized, but my first thought was of Blodwen.

We went at once to the Lloyd-Marshall home at Sawbridgeworth and there was the ginger-headed man in the same blue

check suit leaning against a mantelpiece and drinking coffee, and looking as sane as the manager of a gasworks.

"You're the fellow," I said. "Where's the Autoflow?"

"I left it behind," he answered. "A clear loss of six thousand pounds. It's not the sort of thing covered by insurance."

"Left it behind?" I said. "Where?"

"Well," he answered, "not so much left it behind, as in front."

"You see what I mean?" said Cassell.

"He thinks I'm crazy," said Llewellyn.

"Oh, don't worry about him," I told him. "He thinks everybody's mad. He thought I was. In front where?"

"Tell them, Welly," said Blodwen. "I believe you, if nobody else does."

"Then so do I," I said. "Let's have it."

Mamma Lloyd-Marshall brought us all coffee.

"The whole truth," said Llewellyn, "and nothing but the truth, and if it's stranger than science fiction, I can't help it.

"I was driving back along the Hertford road that day, everything quite normal, and then suddenly there was a most awful noise and everything went bright red. When I came round I was still in the car but I seemed to be inside an enormous building, as big as the airship sheds at Cardington. A lot of people in sunsuits were clustering round. I felt very sick. I thought in a dazed sort of way that there'd been an accident and when a girl with a red cross on her tunic came up and helped me out of the car I went with her without a word. I felt horrible and I didn't care what happened. I was ill for days after that but they looked after me very well."

"What hospital was that?" I asked.

"Lovely place," he said. "I had a round room with walls that looked like glass but you could make any panel opaque if you wanted to just by pressing a button. I had an autobed, where you simply set the dials for however many hours' sleep you fancy and then switch on and lie down. Meals came in on little robot trolleys; when you'd finished you reset the lever and off they trundled with the empties. And three-dimensional colour TV. Complete air conditioning. Tame birds that came and sat on your hand to be stroked, as bright as canaries. And simply wonderful room service."

"But where was this amazing place?"

"Why, right here in Sawbridgeworth," said Llewellyn.

"You see what I mean?" Cassell put in. "And he expects me to put this all in a report to the Chief Constable. Whatever he's got to hide, he doesn't have to say things like this."

"Go on, Llewellyn," I said.

" Of course," he continued, " it was all very confusing at first. To begin with I felt too ill to worry. Then when I came to myself a little it did occur to me that the National Health Service had done me rather proud. Next I began to fancy that I'd been a better Christian than I'd thought and had got past those pearly gates after all. It was all so different from anything I'd known."

" Of course it was," said Cassell. " A fantastic world. I've come across it before, but never quite so bad as this."

" So totally different," Llewellyn went on. " Not having nights, for one thing. You could tell the difference because it was a bluer kind of light after sunset. I think they had an artificial satellite that did it.

" And the food—I simply can't tell you! After all, how can anyone describe a new flavour? Especially the fruit, the jobbonuts and zumberries. Though I didn't care for polowort; it was too much like horse-radish.

" And the things I saw through the glass walls! People flying about just like Peter Pan, only they didn't have wires. And apes, they looked like gorillas, in uniform. Things like great green bottles sometimes cruising about in the sky.

" The weather, too. We were in area ZP 1, and they would announce the day before exactly when and where rain would fall. ' Area ZP 1 will receive two-fifths of an inch of rainfall commencing at 10.45 a.m. and concluding at 12 noon.' No twenty-four hour clocks, you notice; in fact clocks were precisely the same, even to the figures. A surprising example of continuity of tradition, like the red cross the nurse wore."

" And there's a place like this in Sawbridgeworth? " I said. " It's high time I—"

" But it isn't in Sawbridgeworth," said Llewellyn. " Not now. Not yet." He paused and took a deep breath. " Don't you see? I'd been carried forward in time a thousand years! "

" There," said Blodwen to Cassell. " I knew there was some quite simple explanation."

" Pennenna explained it to me, bit by bit," Llewellyn continued. " She was the nurse. A pretty girl in a Mediterranean sort of way. What had really happened was this: these people, way ahead there in 2955, they'd just got on top of time at last. They controlled most other things already—the weather and so on, and I've no doubt space travel was just a commonplace, although, come to think of it, I never heard it mentioned.

" Anyhow, they'd mastered time. And naturally they were dead keen archaeologists—heirs to all the ages and that sort of thing. The first use they made of time control was to pick out of the past specimens for their museums, mint specimens. They had

the Rocket, brand new, snatched from Rainhill, and a stage-coach, and all sorts of things. And for some reason they wanted a Cornish Autoflow; I gather it was the culminating design of the old petrol engine. I don't know quite how or why they picked on mine, but they did. So they kicked it forward in time. Lord knows how. And they kicked me with it. I caused a sensation, I can tell you!"

"They regarded you as a sort of missing link, I suppose," said Cassell.

"In a way," agreed Llewellyn. "The real point was that they hadn't realized their technique would work with people, as well as things. I was the first live human to take the trip. I was medically examined and psycho-analysed and photographed and fingerprinted and lord knows what. In the politest possible way. I gave them all sorts of ideas. And they were talking about setting up an immortal senate of all the ages. Drake and Socrates and Marlborough and Edison and—"

He looked embarrassed. "I could have stayed if I'd wanted to. They're dead keen on personal liberty and that sort of thing. They left it to me. And perhaps I would have stayed, only—"

"Oh Welly!" said his mother, rather hurt.

"Only Pennenna upset me. You see, somewhere about the year 2050 there'd been world disaster. No, not the hydrogen bomb. It was a natural phenomenon—a geological thing. I don't know the details except that I gathered the North Sea was dry land again. There weren't so many people who survived. Those that did, the Noahs of this particular deluge, were called the Seventeen Clans in history. Lots of races had just been wiped right out. Including the Welsh."

"Oh no!" cried Blodwen. "Not us!"

"Every mother's son," declared Llewellyn. "But in spite of that the Seventeen Clans were highly intelligent people. When they started to rebuild the world they wanted to make sure they didn't repeat the old mistakes. All those wars and not enough to go round and all the rest of it! The cause was over-population, of course; too many people. They were determined not to have that happen again.

"Long before the population had got anywhere near the danger limit they had the answer. The only workable one. Everyone is painlessly sterilized—just a dose of rays at ten years of age. But here's the beauty of it: if any of these barren adults go through a special fortnight's course at a clinic they can get back all their powers again.

"I suppose you can see how it works. You've got to get a permit for the treatment, of course. Why, up there in 2955,

instead of giving a fellow the George Cross, they let him have a couple of children. It's really something, the honour of parenthood, I can tell you."

"Oh, horrible," said Blodwen.

"Of course it makes some people a bit frustrated, despite the psychological treatment. Pennenna was one of 'em. Perhaps they didn't want to eradicate all maternal instincts in a nurse. Anyhow, as soon as she knew I was Welsh, she thought up a pretty scheme. She said that if I made up my mind to stay where I was, she felt certain I'd get a Reproduction Permit (Subsection Male) because I was the only existing representative of a dead race, a biological survival. Then I could nominate her and we could surround ourselves with kiddywinkies like the Old Woman who lived in a Shoe. That was her idea."

"Charming thought," I said.

"It wasn't anything of the kind," retorted Llewellyn. "It was a damned insult. I was furious. Would you like to be called a biological specimen? Just as if there was one dodo left, or they dredged up a dinosaur from Loch Ness! What a way to talk about love and marriage and children! The damned impertinence of it, working it all out like that, and just expecting me to sign on the dotted line! Besides, I happen to be engaged, even if by that time Frances would have been dead for centuries. I was quite furious."

"So?"

"So I called Hackory at once. Have I told you about him? He was one of their bigger brains in the new Time Science and I rather think he had designs on Pennenna himself. Anyhow I called him in, and in a towering rage I demanded to be sent back to my own time, at once. Well, I thought they'd fire me out of a rocket or something, or at least give me time to say cheerio to a few friends. But they didn't. Perhaps Hackory was anxious to get rid of me before I changed my mind.

"I was still talking to him when everything went red and that noise started up and suddenly there I was, sitting in the gutter on A414. In the gutter, not in my Cornish Autoflow; they kept that, the damned robbers. But I wasn't half so sick this time and I still had money in my pocket so after I'd collected my wits I got a bus home. And here I am."

"And of course you're glad to be back?" I said.

"Of course I am!" he said, so sharply that I knew he wasn't.

"All this," said Cassell, "can only be due to a lifelong addiction to horror-comics."

"If only you'd brought something back with you," said Blodwen.

"I didn't think," said her brother. "I didn't have time. There were a few jobbonuts in my pocket but they'd gone squashy and I threw them out in the front garden as I came in."

"I can see you do really believe all this," said Cassell to Llewellyn. "People in your mental condition always believe they're telling the truth. But nobody else does, you know, and I—"

"Blodwen does," I said. "And so do I. You forget I saw him go. After that I can believe anything."

I don't know what sort of report Cassell made to the Chief Constable, if he made any, but apparently it wasn't strong enough to have Llewellyn certified. He even went back to his job for a while. A few weeks later, after haunting Sawbridgeworth continuously, I at last managed to run into Blodwen out shopping and gave her a lift around the town.

"How's Welly?" I asked. "What century does he happen to be in now?"

"Oh, this one," she answered, "and I rather fancy he wishes he didn't. Frances broke off the engagement; I suppose she thought he was mental. I never did trust that girl."

Blodwen and I saw rather a lot of each other after that, but at the end of the year I had to go to Scotland to open up the new plant there. I was away for some months and so we rather lost touch.

When I came back almost the first person I saw whom I recognized, over a jug of beer at the Pineapple, was Cassell.

"Remember that Welsh boy?" he asked. "The one that was ashamed to tell us how he lost his Cornish Autoflow? Didn't I tell you he was nuts?"

"Lloyd-Marshall? What's he been doing?"

"Acquiring a criminal record," he said. "Sooner or later he'll end up in Broadmoor. To begin with it was persistent obstruction on A414. He's been getting hold of the most outlandish vehicles and squatting in them. For hours, for days at a time. Steam-rollers, old crocks, penny farthings, motor scooters, anything. One I know for certain he stole, but the owner wouldn't prosecute. Warned off time after time; made six appearances before the magistrates."

"Poor chap," I said.

"The other day he did better," said Cassell. "He got as tight as a drum in Hertford and started raving in the Plough and Harrow. Claimed to have killed off the Welsh race, the whole boiling.

"As it happened there were a couple of Taffys in the bar who

didn't quite get his drift and before you could whistle there were bottles flying about and blood and beer all over the place."

"This is serious," I said.

I left him and rang up Blodwen.

It was as bad as Cassell had said, or worse. The poor lad was nearly past help, or hope. When he wasn't sullen and remote he was petulant and irritable, and half the time he was drunk. He hardly ever ate anything and said the food tasted like sawdust. He had no interest in anything or anybody. He looked thinner and more haggard every day.

I lent him money, I reasoned with him, I pleaded with him, and on one occasion when he was more objectionable than usual I even knocked him down.

The end came that Christmas, and a hell of a Christmas it was. It wasn't a white one, but black and cold. To begin with the mother couldn't stand it any longer and had a nervous breakdown and went into a nursing home. Welly knew it was his fault and it turned him to stone—he hardly ever spoke or changed his expression and was so far gone in misery that even drink was no relief now.

Then on Christmas Eve, of all days, he chose to go missing. For a little while Blodwen and I fooled ourselves that he might have got back to his Pennenna, but Cassell had other views and arranged for the rivers to be dragged.

Llewellyn came back four days later. We never knew where he'd been, but he looked as if he hadn't eaten or slept or even been under shelter since he'd left home. He came limping and reeling into the house, muddy and wet, with his ginger beard looking as red as fire against his dead-white cheek, trembling with exhaustion from head to foot. I knew it was the end and so did he.

"I'm going," he said. He added before he collapsed, "I'm sorry."

They were almost the last words we heard him utter.

We put him to bed at once and rang for a doctor. It just happened that none of the five medicos we rang could come at once. Dr. Lincoln said he'd be with us in twenty minutes without fail, but he was in fact longer than that.

We sat beside Llewellyn's bed and although we both pretended that the hot-water bottles and the stuff we tried to pour down his throat were doing him good, we knew that it was really no use at all, and you can't save people like that.

He lay there in a coma. Then very suddenly he sat bolt upright in bed and screamed. Colour rushed back to his face. His eyes were open and there was a terrible great light in them.

Blodwen buried her face in my shoulder, sobbing.

Llewellyn screamed out: "It's red—everything's red—the noise—" And then he was gone.

I mean *gone.*

The bedclothes were flung about the room as he was whisked out of them. We were left staring at the open empty bed, with the stains on the pillow where we'd spilt the brandy, and the hot-water bottles, and from where we'd flung them his clothes still dripped mud and water onto the floor.

They'd taken pity on him, Pennenna, or Hackory, or someone up there in front among the Seventeen Clans.

We shouldn't really have opened the door at all when Dr. Lincoln rang the bell a few minutes later; he was very rude to us, poor man, when we tried to explain it had all been a mistake. Half an hour later Cassell called, and we didn't tell him anything either. He told me, in confidence, that for certain Llewellyn was a suicide case; they'd find him in some pond or other.

"Unstable people, these Welsh," he said. "Emotional."

It's one of the things I like about them, especially Blodwen. We were so happy that evening, so happy for Welly and for ourselves, and we got engaged. We agreed that in view of what we knew about the future of the race it would probably be better not to have any children but to leave all that sort of thing to Llewellyn and our dear sister-in-law, Pennenna.

Blodwen still owns the house at Sawbridgeworth. Oddly enough, Cassell took it. We still don't know whether he really wanted it for himself and his family of five or whether he went there so that he could pull up the floorboards to find out where we had buried Llewellyn in quicklime.

There's a clause in the lease that requires him to preserve with every possible care a small bush with hairy yellow-and-black leaves that has started to grow at a great pace between the laburnum and the ornamental cherry.

No one has ever been able to tell us what it is, and we think it must have sprung up from one of the jobbonuts Llewellyn threw down in the garden. Perhaps next year it'll bear some fruit.

★ ★ ★

THE OSTRICH

The ostrich roams the great Sahara.
Its mouth is wide, its neck is narra.
It has such long and lofty legs,
I'm glad it sits to lay its eggs.

OGDEN NASH

GHOST KILLER

The parched African plain
was like the outskirts of hell

BY ROBERT W. KREPPS

THEY climbed an ant-hill to make sure they had seen what they had seen; standing together on the red mound, the white man and the African stared at the great dark animal that moved steadily northward across the plain, and in their excitement they forgot its name. They grinned, making inarticulate sounds at one another, and clambered down again. They were in the jeep and rattling south before Tom Birke said, "Sable. Of course, sable!"

Then they both laughed aloud, because it was as if they had not remembered the word for meat, or gun, or friendship.

"Ndio," agreed Kip, the car boy. "Sable antelope, a young bull, with promise of fine horns." The jeep crashed into a gully, and Kip took it with easy nonchalance up the other side. Thirty-odd miles of drought-seared country lay between them and the Birke Animal Farm. Two hours would see them home.

During those hours, Tom did what he had seldom done before: thought of a splendid beast in terms of money. His first words to Ena, as he pounced from the jeep, were, "Five-fifty! Five hundred and fifty pounds, right in our hands!"

Ena Birke was slim, a few years younger than her husband's thirty-two, with dark hair long ago burnt tawny by the Tanganyika sun. Over one forearm snaked the old pink scar she'd got from her first lion; otherwise she was flawless in the eyes of every man who knew her, and to Tom the cicatrice was no more than a beauty-spot.

She held out both hands to him, saying quickly, "Only an elephant brings that much, and the elephants have deserted us. What have you found?"

He kissed her, holding her close without regard for the afternoon heat; almost released her, and then kissed her hard again before telling his news. "Absolutely perfect sable bull, just coming out of adolescence with his coat still chocolate brown. He's headed straight for the river. I suppose the permits haven't arrived?"

"Not yet. But Tom," his wife said, "a sable's worth three hundred pounds at best."

"And aren't we canny enough to get two-fifty for Jester?"

Jester was their solitary lion, their last animal of any worth; a magnificent fellow, more pet then property. "We must sell him some day, certainly," said Ena, her voice striving for carelessness.

"And five-fifty's a minimum if we mean to go on."

That was cold fact. The big truck with which Tom Birke coursed antelope and buffalo and gazelle, was verging on collapse; whatever broke next would go unreplaced, the last spare axle having been installed weeks before. The jeep was growing erratic, the Land Rover had been out of operation since Kip's involuntary quarrel with a rhino. Petrol stores sank daily. The salaries of the natives, the animal boys and Kip and the farm help, were already due. Worst of all, the bank's note was payable at the end of the month: £500 with no possible ifs or buts . . .

They went onto the screened verandah, sat in wicker chairs to sip at long frosty sundowners. Tom sprawled, a huge red man as homely as his wife was elegant. Hair like rusted wire, vivid blue eyes, and a mighty sun-chafed promontory of a nose, the flushed face spattered indiscriminately with large warm-gold freckles, he looked as though he would be hot to the touch. His features were saved from ugliness by a strong sure gentleness that pervaded every expression, even when he scowled and swore.

"Damn it, Ena! Why am I such a blasted poor manager, sweetheart?" The thought of selling Jester, a personal friend, had killed his exhilaration. "A man can clear ten thousand profit a year in this game, if he's not soft-headed about it."

He glanced out at the line of pens and cages; the sun gleamed on their wire, burnished their hard wood, touching no living thing in all of them save the drowsy lion. Beyond there were the beehive-shaped farm buildings, beyond them the hot and silent plain. Drought had emptied both plain and cages, for the first time in his experience.

His wife said, slowly and almost angrily, "We aren't in the animal business for money."

"We're in it to live as we wish. We can't do that unless we keep a bit ahead of bare operating expenses. Q.E.D.," he added wryly, thinking that unless they caught the sable, they would no longer be in the business at all.

He drained his glass, hoisted himself up to prowl the verandah; in motion his enormous limbs, which were clumsy in repose, had a lithe power that was almost beauty. Eight years, he thought, it's a long time in which to have everything you want, a

wife who most amazingly loves you, a profession you're suited for, a home in the midst of grandeur. Eight years, but they ought to have gone on to be ten and twenty and fifty.

" I should have anticipated this drought. Should have piled up some cash against the time when there wouldn't be anything worth taking, when all the brutes would migrate to water," he said aloud.

He could have done it, he knew, for he ranked with the best of Africa's bring-'em-back-alive hunters. But conservation was in his bones, a deep-rooted mania. He caught one zebra where he might have caught ten; he would spend a week in choosing the best roan of a troop, and then fall to admiring it so that ultimately he wouldn't capture it at all. Always calculating his toll of the great herds so that it stopped short—too far short—of greediness, he had betrayed himself now to the edge of ruin.

" You'll get the sable," said Ena. " We'll make out."

" I might not even be given a sable permit," he said gloomily.

A runner came at noon the next day, a Swahili boy sweating in the torrid sun, carrying a bundle of envelopes thrust in a split stick. Tom riffled through the permits: lion, leopard, impala, wart hog. One for a reedbuck. One for a sable. He looked for Ena, and she was already in the truck, calling out to Kip, checking the equipment.

They rolled north on the drought-stricken plain. Tom drove, and shortly he began to sing; Ena joined in, her voice sweet with jubilation. The three boys in the back tapped their bare feet and made exclamations of great promise to themselves. Tom and Kip knew exactly where the young antelope would be found, they even argued loudly over which particular donga he was crossing now, how many miles he would have covered in his arrow-straight journey towards the distant river.

They agreed that they would sight him about sundown of the following day. They knew animals, it was their profession to know animals; they allowed no possibility of losing the quarry. Nor did Ena Birke. She gazed out over the arid deserted land, which should have been covered by numberless herds, and because she loved this place and did not want to lose it, she was filled with certainty about the sable antelope.

The acacia trees had been stripped to their bone-white thorns, with only a few curled sere leaves clinging here and there on the brittle limbs. What remained of the grass was powdery and wholly useless as fodder. Only the ant-hills, lumpy thirty-foot towers sprouting parched trees at the top, remained unchanged in the terrible heat.

Ena saw it as it had been for most of their eight years in

Tanganyika. She saw the plain all green again, with dew on the gaudy scarlet and blue flowers, and clouds of sand grouse and francolin sweeping in to drink at the water-hole that was now as dry as a kiln. The herds would come back, too—the wildebeeste and the tiny frisky Tommies, the bouncing impala and the big roan antelopes, the sullen buffalo with their guardian egrets.

Then the cats would follow, the prides of lions would lie up on the hills once more; and their attendants, the hyenas and jackals, would make their songs of hunger under a swollen moon. Perhaps the two cheetah would return, the lovely pair that Tom had never had the heart to capture, saying they were the fleetest and freest things in the world.

She caught herself calculating how much two prime cheetah would fetch in the booming animal market today. Apprehension touched her, and she thought fiercely of the sable antelope they were bound to catch. Last chance, she said to herself, last chance.

A good chance, though. A certainty, it must be a certainty. You cannot lose a way of life simply because you follow it unselfishly, nor a homeland because you cherish it so much that you dare not plunder it.

By evening they had reached a stretch of forest: niombo forest, scrubby, sour, and mould-stinking; much of it burnt off to the dark, corky earth. They hated the smell of the place, and drove on with the headlights shining, camping beyond the niombo on a barren knoll that should have been lush with grass and tangling creepers. The drought was omnipresent.

Tom strolled to ease his cramped legs. He stumbled over bones, the friable rib cage of a Grant's gazelle. In the silver-fog light of a starved moon he stared at the bones, trying not to feel them a bad omen.

They all slept poorly, the three natives muttering in their sleep. Africa was almost silent around them, and the Birkes were more accustomed to sleep through pandemonium; Tom rolled and grumbled, Ena lay tense, each listening half-consciously for the roaring of absent lions, the bark of lost zebra.

"Tonight," said Tom, as they drove away from their camp. "We'll catch up with the blighter tonight." He checked his ropes and pole, tested the noose, the running loop; Ena, driving, glanced at his big hands working on the snare, and was refreshed by their hard skilled masculinity. Those hands would never let the farm slip away from them . . .

She was encouraged to voice her fear, wanting him to quell it. "If we don't find the buck—"

"We will."

" But *could* we go on to the river? If the buck is lost?"

He had been thinking of that for weeks. Regretfully he said, " No, baby. It's six, seven days from here, and the truck would never make it. Even supposing we had enough petrol, our axles wouldn't survive rough going like that. We've got to take whatever crosses our own territory." And the sable is likely to be the last creature we'll see here, he thought, till the rains come.

The sun grew so hot that it seemed the air must soon begin to bubble. The metal of the truck threw waves of heat like a tin furnace. Tom's face was coated by dust which, mingled with sweat, became an itchy slime; the khaki drill shorts and shirt were stained black. It was as though they were driving through the outskirts of hell.

Dongas, arid gullies, meandered across this land. Some the truck plunged through, others required a detour. Their progress was slower. The man who had been trailing them was able to run within sight by two o'clock; Kip, spotting him first, banged on the cab for Tom to halt.

The man came up to them soon after, a tall lean tribesman panting deeply with sun and fatigue, his leg muscles quivering. " Bwana," he said huskily. " Bwana Birke."

" Give him a drink," said Tom, and Kip reached out a mug to the runner. He drank and thanked Tom gravely, and began to speak in his own language. Tom's face darkened.

" What is it? " Ena asked. She spoke Swahili and Masai, but this was neither.

" Little trouble over east, at Manyaka's kraal." Tom scratched his knee, a sign with him of nervousness, of indecision. " A leopard's turned man-eater with the drought. Ghost leopard, this boy says: they can't trap him and their gas-pipe guns explode when aimed at him, and the muzzle-loaders go haywire and the spears miss, and all in all the brute's got the whole place under a magic spell. Real terror of a cat."

He looked at Ena, his mouth wrenched sideways. " It's a hell of a thing," he said. " Eight people dead in three weeks. A hell of a thing! "

" Manyaka. He's the chief—"

" Who helped me catch the £900 elephant," said Tom. " Yes. A good man, Manyaka. A good friend. I doubt if we'd have the farm if it weren't for Manyaka."

The sale of that elephant had made it possible for them to keep the truck and the jeep, four years ago; nine hundred pounds had been as vital then, almost, as five-fifty was today.

" Well," Tom said, scratching his knee again, " well, what about it? "

" Can't we collect the sable first?" she asked, knowing the answer.

" Tonight, or say tomorrow with average luck. Then two-three days back to the farm, and three at the least to Manyaka's kraal." He swore vividly in Swahili. " How many people would a man-eater take in another week?"

" But the farm," she said. " The farm is your life and mine."

" No. Our happiness, but no more. We won't die if we lose it." He said to the runner in his own language, " Get into the back," and the man said gratefully, " Thank you, bwana." The truck rolled forward.

He thought of the sable, trotting alone through the thirsty land far ahead, a beautiful bull whose hoofs would be lifting puffs of yellow dust as he travelled with sure instinct to the river. One perfect and valuable animal in all this drought-sapped country, and Tom could find him without hesitation because there was only one direction in which the antelope could possibly be going.

Tom Birke's hands tightened on the wheel until the knuckles reddened beneath their tan. He swung the wheel savagely, and the truck veered sharply and held to the east . . .

That night, as they ate tinned bully and rice, peaches, and tea, Ena said tentatively, " Suppose you catch the leopard, instead of shooting it. That's fifty pounds, and Jester makes three hundred."

" Baby," he said gently, " leopards are a drug on the market. Fifty pounds buys a good one—and this is a man-eater, probably old, moth-eaten, lame and half blind."

He shook his head. He was by nature an optimistic and a happy man, but in the drought he had learnt to be coldly practical. " If I could sell cages and gear and guns and the cartridge loops off my bush-jacket, and get enough to save the farm, I'd do it and be glad to. But there aren't any buyers. The little dry spell's scared them off. And by the time we've coped with this leopard, the sable will be browsing under palm trees at the river." He lapsed into dismal silence.

They got away at the first grey of morning, felt the heat grow and deepen till it seemed to char their bones. Africa lay baking, cracking under their wheels. There is horror in a verdant land gone dry and yellow. Tom felt that the whole continent must be disintegrating. He could not force himself to talk, and for hours the only sound was that of the labouring engine.

This changed in the afternoon. There were fresh clanks and a grinding that worried him; he and Kip did an overhaul job in the scant shadows of a copse of leafless mimosa, checked the cans of petrol and water, then made measurements on a map, and frowned at each other.

"We cannot ride to Manyaka's," said Kip in his careful mission-school English. He put a brown finger on the map. "We must turn so, and go so, or there will be not enough fuel to get home."

Tom nodded. "We'll drive up to the top of these slopes, and I'll leave you with the truck. That's about six hours' walk to the kraal."

"Ndio, bwana," said Kip morosely. He was thinking of the sable, and wishing a plague on all Manayaka's tribe.

In the truck it had been bad, but on foot the heat was worse. They followed an ancient, deep-cut rhino track across a low hill sprinkled with thornbush, and the insects, which no drought could decimate, rose to the attack.

Camelflies hummed, lit on exposed skin to make new itches in the sweat; pygmy bees, stingless minikins, crept with idiot curiosity into sleeves and under collars, and had to be crushed ruthlessly, because their small constant crawlings irritated nerves already galled by dust and sun. One huge blue beetle persisted in flying full tilt at Ena, ramming her again and again until Tom snatched it out of her hair and killed it with his boot-heel.

Two hours from the village, they made camp on the edge of a forest; here the drought was old, gaunt thick trees lifting from tindery brush to carry tangles of dead creeper up towards the cloudless brass bowl of the sky.

"We won't go into that," said Tom. "The ghost leopard's not going to catch us roaming his territory after dark."

Ena brushed wet hair from her forehead. "Tom, why do they call it a ghost?"

"Because they can't kill it. Why d'you ask?"

"I've been thinking." She hesitated, afraid to suggest hope to him now, when his unhappiness seemed changed to a kind of bitter, bearable dullness. She still had faith in her own day-dreams. "If they can't kill it, perhaps it's a big strong specimen; what if you caught it, and it proved good—and then supposing there was another sable before the end of the month . . .?"

He was so strung up he wanted to hammer at her with words, to vent on her his anger at the man-eater and the lost antelope and the men who would take away his farm. He checked his scornful answer, looked at his wife to see her clearly—worn and harassed and nervous—for the first time in days.

He managed to smile and, putting a hand to her temple, gently pushed up a damp tawny strand she had missed. "I killed a ghost leopard in Kenya before the war. It was dingy orange and had three legs. I caught a ghost buffalo for the Kikuyu that was such a black old antique I couldn't sell him for dog meat."

"Then the farm is quite gone?"

He told her as tenderly as grief and a dry throat would allow. " Quite, quite gone, sweetheart."

" We could still go back. We could find the sable. He isn't out of range yet, is he? "

" Forget it, Ena."

" Why? Killing man-eaters isn't your job, Tom, nor your duty."

He took out the sodden rag of a handkerchief and patted her serious face with it, then mopped at his own. " Yes; it is," he said slowly. " There's quite enough hatred and bloodshed in Africa today, without me allowing a man-eater to run loose."

" But why do *you* have to give up everything, just to kill a beast, a terribly dangerous beast; for someone else? "

" Because I can," he said, a little surprised at her. " Didn't you know that? "

She smiled and nodded and turned away, more satisfied with this big red man than she had ever been before.

Manyaka said, " Bwana Tom! " and gripped his hand in two sinewy fists all wrinkled and knotted with strong old age. " Bwana Tom." He could say nothing more for a moment. Then he began to speak of the leopard.

It had killed first in the early days of the drought and, remaining in the forest when buck and pig had gone, it had continued to prey on the village. No, it was not lame, nor of great age; a man-eater by accident, the chief believed, it had seen no reason to migrate so long as there remained a supply of this strange new food in the vicinity.

Leopards being notoriously unwise about traps, Manyaka's people—after their guns had failed—had built a wooden cage, baited it first with live kid, then with dead dog; the leopard had walked round it and laughed, and snatched a girl from a hut. Just last night it had killed again, a foolhardy hunter whose smashed musket was all the searchers could find of him this morning. Aiyee, it was truly a ghost cat, but bwana Tom would blow it in two.

" Bwana Tom'll have a go at it, anyway." He looked at his rifles, took the standard leopard gun, the American .30-06.

Manyaka knew Tom's rifles. He murmured, " It is a very large beast."

" Big as an elephant? " bantered Tom.

" Am I a man to say a leopard is large for the sake of a good tale, bwana? " He led the way to the village edge. " See its track! "

The pug was enormous, fully five inches long. Tom whistled

as he knelt over it, said to Ena, " Biggest damn leopard paw I ever laid eyes on."

The clover-shape of the heel pad lay faint in the dust, the arrogant print of the murderer. Tom changed his .30-06 for the heavier .375, growling to Ena that he'd take no chances with such a monster.

Manyaka called, and a servant brought him a pair of thin-hafted spears with burnished steel heads. " I'll go alone," said Tom, but the old chief stiffened. " It is my village, and I am still a warrior, bwana."

The white man looked at him and nodded.

He slung the antelope lasso from his bush-jacket belt, for he never moved in this country without a rope. He kissed his Ena; holding her at arm's length, he searched for words of reassurance, but the picture of her as a housewife in Cape Town or Jo'burg rose in his imagination, he remembered that the beast he sought was the ultimate cause of the loss of their farm, and he could not say anything. His broad red face went all awry with anger, and he turned and walked quickly into the rainless dying forest.

There was a light wind, whispering in papery leaves and blowing the dead sawgrass so that it rustled. The two men moved down a broad elephant trail, the thatched huts of the village disappearing behind; Manyaka turned off and went through crackling underbrush to a small clearing.

" Here we found the musket." There was blood, great splotches caked hard on bare grey earth and yellow grass.

Tom followed it until there was no more, then spoored the cat among the thickets by pugprints and the occasional dragmarks of its prey. He lost it, cast about for a long while, discovered four toe-pads and the clover heel-track at the rim of a small grove of wild olives. He went in and found the spring, scarcely a trickle over seared mud and yet a beautiful sight in his drought-accustomed eyes. The leopard had come unpausing, haughtily, to the water, lapped, and passed on, and Tom knew that this had been a recent visit, after the beast had eaten.

He was not searching for the killer now, but for the corpse of the native. He went back among ochre-barked acacias and stinging nettles; ploughed through the dense thirsty tangle, making a racket like a rhino, headed in the first direction and again found the trail. Manyaka followed him, tall, quiet, oppressed by sorrows.

Within a mile they had found the cat's larder: a heavy-trunked mvulamvula tree, the dead man draped across the lowest fork, legs thrusting as stiff and thin against the sky as two rifle barrels.

Tom took his bearings and said, " Your leopard probably lies

up on that hill. We must approach the tree carefully, in case he watches."

"Ndio, bwana Tom." He spoke in Swahili. He was an old man, and had forgotten that the hunter knew his tongue. "Moto, kalu," he said. "It is very hot and dry."

They crept nearly to the base of the tree, through spotty wait-a-bit bush whose fish-hook daggers ripped khaki and flesh. The leaves rattled above them, and they sat down behind a natural boma of thornbush, looking at each other to keep from watching the grotesque form of the corpse.

"He'll come back in the dark, Manyaka. He won't mind our smell because he has a scorn of humans." That's with luck he won't mind it, Tom thought. "When he climbs to get his supper, I'll shoot him."

"Vema!" Manyaka glanced upwards. "Our guns have been useless, but yours is surely greater than the ghost's magic."

"Why do you call him a ghost, Manyaka?"

"He is a ghost," said the old man stubbornly. "You do not believe, but you will see."

The day dragged by, the first powder-blue tint of dusk at last appearing; they had not spoken again because of the leopard.

Twilight deepened swiftly, the killer might come now at any moment, Tom felt his skin prickle slightly with apprehension, and suddenly he had wiped the sweat from his eyes and was standing up and saying to Manyaka, "Remain here, chief, and do nothing, nothing, whatever happens."

He moved through the brush, a few dry shoots popping underfoot. Reaching the mvulamvula, he slung his rifle over his shoulder, put his hands on the thick trunk, and began to climb.

It had come to him that he could not shoot the leopard until he had seen it at close quarters.

The farm was gone for good and the hunter did not even consider the small price he might have been given for this cat; it meant nothing now.

He'd snare it, examine it, and then in all probability, finish it off.

He reached the crotch where the dead man lay, inadvertently put his hand on smooth cold flesh, and jerked back, almost losing his balance. Setting his teeth to hold off nausea, he gathered himself and leapt for the dark shadow of the thickest branch beyond the corpse.

The tree was solid under his tensed hands, one foot slid into space, and then he had scrambled to momentary safety in a second fork. He was now some six feet above the leopard's cache. He settled his back against the bark, adjusted the heavy .375 so that it might be pulled into his hands with a single motion.

He took the antelope lasso from his bush-jacket, watching the mottled darkness below him as he worked. When he was satisfied with his loop, he measured half the length of the rope and cut it in two, hanging the extra coils on his belt again.

An hour passed with nerve-tearing slowness. He knew that he was attempting a wild, an insane stunt. A cat as huge as this could disembowel him. It might come straight up at him, faster than he could go for the rifle.

Whatever it did, the odds were long against its capture, short for Tom's escaping with a whole skin. He shrugged. This was what he had to do.

He was not sure when it came; the knowledge dawned on Tom gradually, from no particular sound—in all the forest there seemed to be only the insects alive—but from a kind of living stillness, a too-quiet silence below him. The leopard was standing by the base of the tree.

His body frozen immobile in the hot night, Tom Birke peered downward. The thin moon touched the dead warrior eerily, could not penetrate the thick shadows below him.

There was something down there, damn it! It couldn't be seen and yet his hunter's sense assured him it was there. Abruptly a glow appeared, a double gleam of light—amber or red or silver, he could not have said—as the cat turned its eyes briefly upward. Then it had leapt effortlessly into the fork and was standing on its last night's kill, turning its head from side to side as though the fresh strong man-scent annoyed it.

Tom moved his arms out from where they had rested on his thighs; at the rustle of cloth the great eyes shot up at him, and in the tiny particle of time before the beast would grow taut and spring, Tom had dropped the noose over its head and hauled up.

Squawling, the cat jerked back, fighting the rope. Then it twisted and fell, the lariat hissing through Tom's hands. A hundred and forty pounds of raging muscle sought to tug him out of the tree; fighting for balance, he snubbed the lasso round his branch, tried to shorten it further, kicked for support against bark that was suddenly not within reach, and felt the thrashing rope catch him at hip and shoulder and fling him off the limb.

He landed on his side on hard-baked earth that sent a jolting shock through him. He came up, half numbed, grabbing for the second length of rope on his belt and twisting to face the spitting killer.

The night baffled him, shades rushing through shadow; he stepped backward, fear sucking at his belly, fear more violent than he had ever known.

He was too close to the tree, the eyes of the cat were before him and the thing had crouched at his very feet to hurl itself at his throat: without warning two slender pieces of wood came thrusting into its face, prodding, slapping, bewildering, driving the man-eater back into a baffled crouch against the mvulamvula. Manyaka said, " Quickly, the rope! "

Afterwards, Tom Birke could not remember any thought; it was all pure instinct.

His hand shot out, shoving one end of the rope at his friend. Then he had leapt through thorny bush around the great tree and was passing, bent nearly double, between Manyaka and the cat, still kept at bay by the flashing spear-butts. The chief let his weapons fall, took a two-handed grip on the rope, and together they wound it tight, four spans about the tree and the raging beast, until it was held immovable.

" I told you to remain in the boma, Manyaka."

Tom was panting, and the pain of his bruised side made him a little sick.

" I couldn't, bwana Tom. There was a fight—"

" I know. Thank you, Manyaka. Now go to the kraal and bring my men. They can help me tie this cat for travelling." He peered at the chief in the darkness. " Why didn't you spear him, Manyaka? Why did you do such a dangerous thing? "

" The bwana seemed to want him alive." Tom could not be sure, but he thought the old fellow was grinning at him. Then he was alone.

He climbed the mvulamvula and unsnubbed the lasso from its branch. He dropped it and came down and worked it off the snarling animal's neck, moving surely and happily because this was his profession and he was quite without fear of the cat. He took a few turns round it with the rope again, going carefully so that the later job would be easier. Then he sat down a couple of yards off to wait for his boys.

Having done this crazy thing, this quite unwarrantable capture of a beast which anyone else would have shot, he was filled with an emotion he could only describe as a splendid resignation. He had got his second wind; he felt power in his hands and in his heart.

He had been wrong to say that the farm was his happiness, for contentment lay in what he was, not what he owned; in how he followed his beliefs, not how he earned his living.

Why, he thought, surprised, I'm still the same man, the drought hasn't changed me. Let 'em take the farm. I can still do anything, damn it, anything I truly want to do!

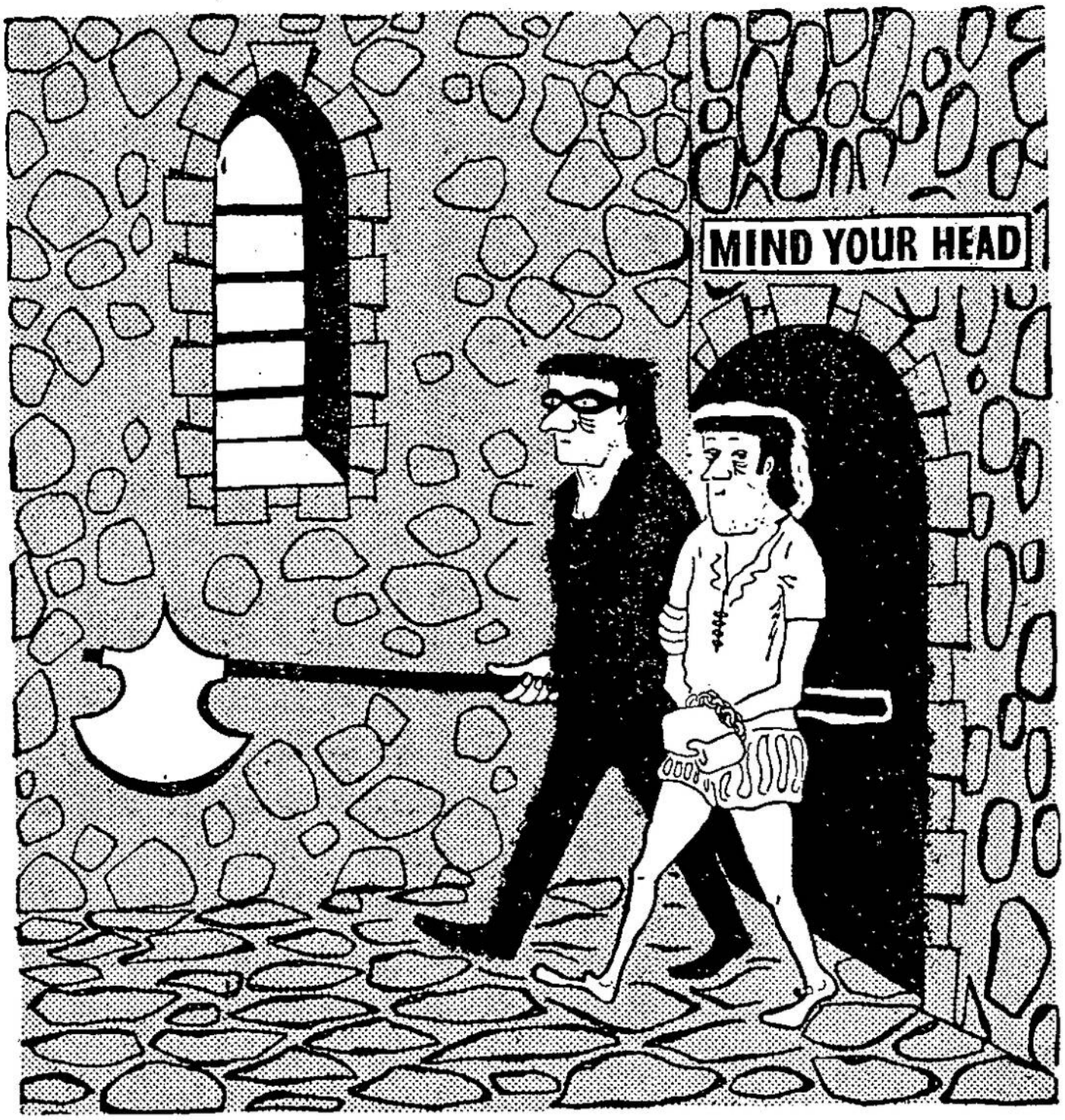
The moon rose higher. Gradually the lower shadows were

laced and dappled with a light like pale silver mist. Tom Birke and the snared animal watched each other without motion. A patch of weak moonglow crept across the dry ground to touch the cat's thick soft coat.

Tom fumbled with shaking fingers in the pocket of his bush-jacket, found a bent cigarette. If he stayed in this country fifty years longer—and he would live here now, on his farm and Ena's, until he died—he would never feel more proud than he did at this moment.

Only once in his life had he heard of an albino leopard, a beast so rare that its value could scarcely be imagined . . . He lit the cigarette as though it were a stick of ceremonial incense.

Creamy buff and spotted with grey rosettes, as lovely a thing as he had ever looked upon, the fur of the albino ghost leopard shone in the moonlight with the lustre of a captive star.



WIFE, *n.* (*pl.-ves*) *Woman, especially one who is old & rustic or uneducated* (*now rare . . .*)

The Concise Oxford Dictionary

Life Interest

" I never understand why women are proud of being married," said Miss Burke.

" I do," said Emma. " Someone has wanted to spend his life with them. That is surely a cause for pride."

I. COMPTON-BURNETT, *Mother and Son*

Solecism

At last, by the edge of a canal, they came to the " Royal George." The landlady stood at the door and rounded off an argument with an elderly little man in a bowler hat.

" First 'e takes off 'is boots in the saloon bar," she said, enlisting the sympathy of her new audience, " which is not the action of a gentleman."

" They was wet," said the little man; " wet as 'ell."

" Well, and who wants your wet boots on the counter, I should like to know. Then, if you please, he calls me a conspiring woman because I tells him to stop and put them on before he goes 'ome."

" Want to go 'ome," said the little man. " 'Ome to my wife and kids. ***Trying to keep a man from 'is wife.***"

" No one wants to keep you from your wife, you old silly. All I says is for Gawd's sake put on your boots before you go 'ome. What'll your wife think of you coming 'ome without boots."

" She won't mind 'ow I come 'ome. Why, bless you, I ain't been 'ome at all for five years."

EVELYN WAUGH, *Vile Bodies*

Sunstruck

Dearest Evelyn, I often think of you
Out with the guns in the jungle stew.
Yesterday I hittapotamus,
I put the measurements down for you
But they got lost in the fuss.
It's not a good thing to drink
Out here,
I've practically given it up,
Dear.
Tomorrow I am going alone a long way
Into the jungle. It is all grey
But green on top.
Only sometimes when a tree has fallen
The sun comes down plop,
It is quite appalling.
You never want to go in a jungle pool
In the hot sun. It would be the act of a fool.
Because it's always full of anacondas, Evelyn, not looking ill-fed
I'll say. So no more now, from your loving husband, Wilfred.

STEVIE SMITH, *The Jungle Husband*

Lord and Master

Pedro was standing lightly on two tables; he had been given white-beer to drink spiced with potato spirits; someone in the audience who knew about as much French as he did had constituted himself link and compère.

" What did the first wife do? "

" The first wife she weep all day." Pedro curled up on the boards, impersonating a lady moping on a chaise-longue.

" And the second wife? "

" She weep all day, too." (The *liar*, Caroline said.) Pedro posed himself into a graceful figure pining by a window.

" Now tell them why these poor women weep."

Pedro drew himself up.

" Because my Master is very Magnificent Man."

SYBILLE BEDFORD, *A Legacy*

Moonstruck

I promise you to be an excellent husband, but give me a wife who, like the moon, would appear in the sky not every day.

ANTON CHEKHOV, *Letter, 1895*

Policeman's Lot

Come lads and come lasses, come old and come young
Let's away to the market to see the rare fun:
There's a pretty young woman so fair to behold,
Brought there by her husband is now to be sold.

Some thousands of people of every degree,
Assembled this beautiful damsel to see:
With a halter of straw round her waist then she came,
Sure you never beheld such a comical game.

Then her husband sang out with a heart full of glee
Who wants a good wife? come and buy one of me;
She can sing a good song, she can tell a good tale,
Laugh and cry, scold the maid, and drink hollands & ale.

Now a gallant Policeman by chance passing by,
For just twenty shillings this young wife did buy.
And a good silver watch did the bargain complete,
The husband for joy scarce could stand on his feet.

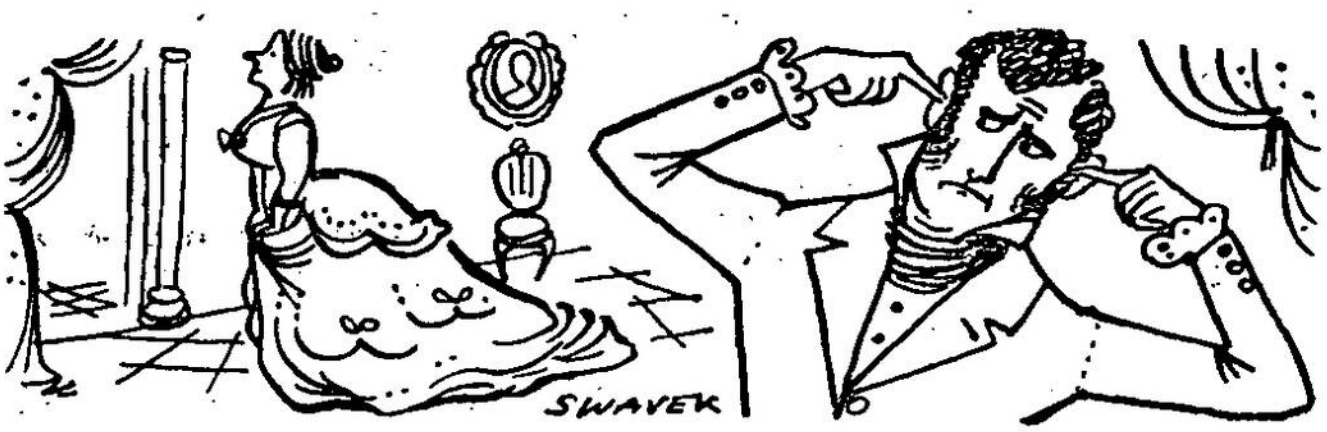
O then from the market they marchèd away,
While all the good people did shout and huzza
The old husband got drunk, sang and dancèd with glee
If I marry again may the devil take me.

AUTHOR UNKNOWN, *Interesting Particulars of the Sale of a Wife*

Better Part

When in a mellow mood, he [Tennyson] talked of his friends: Fitzgerald, who, he said, parted with his wife because he could not stand " the rustle, rustle, rustle " of her silk dresses. Tennyson made the rustle intolerably sibilant. Fitzgerald did everything for her comfort so long as she lived away.

VIOLET MARKHAM, *Friendship's Harvest*



PURRING COUNTESS

A disturbing memory nudged his mind

BY MELBA MARLETT

DURING the twenty-five years that he had been a minister of the gospel the Reverend James Starr had known many people well, in the special, intimate way in which a teacher knows her pupils or a doctor his patients. He had met the wicked, the ignorant, the misguided, the foolish, and the good; but until he became pastor of St. Anne's Episcopal Church he had never met a human being whom he thoroughly disliked.

On the first Sunday morning that he presided over his new congregation Mr. Starr had seen this man's face. It had leapt to his eye as he sat in his great carved chair waiting for the choir to finish the hymn; and it seemed to Mr. Starr that the light, the colour, and the music dropped away, and that he and this stranger were left in a soundless solitude, staring into each other's eyes. In that moment such a disgust and loathing rose in Mr. Starr's soul that he had to close his eyes and pray briefly for serenity.

Later in the course of his ministerial duties he discovered that the man's name was Hector Jamieson and that he was a doctor of medicine. Dr. Jamieson and his wife lived, childless, in an ornate Victorian house in one of the older roads, where it was permissible that the doctor's surgery be built on at the back of his residence.

Mr. Starr noted, in the course of an evening walk, that the neighbourhood was a lonely one, wooded and quiet. The grounds were large, and the house nearest to the Jamiesons'—a white plaster mansion with a red tile roof—was vacant and had a *For Sale* sign displayed at the bottom of the drive.

And though Dr. Jamieson's surgery hours were plainly marked on the notice on his side gate there were no cars parked there, nor any people coming or going.

This concurred with the whispers Mr. Starr had heard that Dr. Jamieson's patients were exclusively female and came only late at night.

A minister must not listen to whispered gossip, and Mr. Starr closed his ears to it, but the illogical revulsion towards Dr. Jamieson remained. The man came to church every Sunday, and Mr. Starr found himself preaching too often on such texts as " Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord."

He told himself that it was merely Jamieson's face that had turned him against the man. As features went, it was an ordinary face, broad, dark, strong-nosed, a moustache partially concealing the mouth.

But, really, it was not a face at all, it was a mask; and the alarming thing was that no lively eyes looked out from behind it. The eyes, too, were part of the mask, remote and expressionless. Dear God, what horrors the man must be concealing, to wear a mask *over* a mask!

At this point in his reverie Mr. Starr quickly turned to Corinthians to read about Christian charity, and to ask, humbly, that he be granted more of that virtue.

Mrs. Jamieson, on the other hand, he liked at once. She was a slender, nervous woman with a soft Southern voice, an air of good breeding, and an almost childish desire to please. As teacher of a Sunday-school class and an earnest worker in the church, she came often to the rectory for consultation and reassurance.

" If I'm a burden to you, Mr. Starr," she said apologetically, " please tell me. I know I should try to be more independent, but making decisions—even little ones—has always terrified me."

" I'd be happy to see you every day, if you care to come that often, Mrs. Jamieson."

Her trouble was, he saw, that she was lonely. Except for the church, she had no social activity.

" The doctor's evenings are always full of appointments," she told him, " so we don't entertain and we never go out. When we were first married I used to go by myself, but I don't any more. It's impossible, really, for a wife to have a circle of friends that doesn't include her husband."

Not once did she intimate that anything more serious than the length of his surgery hours kept her husband from entering the social life of the town.

Mr. Starr was meticulously careful not to pry. Much as he yearned to hear every detail about Jamieson—how the man obsessed him!—his conscience forbade his asking Jamieson's wife any questions. However, he could not help noticing that she seemed happiest when she was speaking of her childhood, for at such times her face took on a shy radiance and her restless hands lay quietly in her lap. Her maiden name had been Claiborne and

she came of a wealthy Georgia family. Her father was dead, but her mother still lived, alone, in the big white house in Atlanta.

"I keep thinking," she said wistfully one bleak February day, "how lovely the old place always looks at this time of year. Heavens, how long it's been since I was there!"

"This is the season for migrating," he said encouragingly.

Her hands flew to their nervous clutching of each other. "I couldn't, really. The doctor hates to be alone in the house and—well, he says it's Mother's place to visit *us*." She averted her face and sighed. "He says that if I go running down there it will look as if I were after her money."

"Nonsense!" said Mr. Starr loudly.

Her smile was grateful. "Well, of course *I* know that Mother wouldn't think any such thing, but the doctor's a proud man and he doesn't want anyone to think he expects favours of them."

Mr. Starr wanted very much to say flatly that that kind of pride was a sin, a setting of oneself above the rest of humanity, but he refrained. Instead he remarked pleasantly that he supposed, things being what they were, her mother would have to do the visiting, and Mrs. Jamieson said that her mother didn't like to travel, and changed the subject.

In spite of her evasions and her polite reticence, he came to have a pretty good picture of what her life was like and he found it appalling. She was not a militant person, and no one could mistake her goodness. How, then, could she bear to live in that lonely house with the mysterious young women going in and out of the gate at night? And could she continue to exist in a social vacuum without friends or companionship? On the other hand, what else could she do? Her husband was not foolish enough to let her go, even if she wanted to. She provided the smoke-screen of respectability, she was the reason he was tolerated at all.

To his prayers at night the minister added one for the strengthening of Mrs. Jamieson's immortal soul, that it might live with pitch and not be defiled; and he made a point of passing her house on his walks, like a watchman making his rounds. It served no purpose, but it made him feel better.

Then the Countess Vanelli came to town.

The *For Sale* sign vanished from the lawn of the white plaster mansion next door to the Jamiesons', and the place blazed with lights until late at night. Temporarily Mr. Starr abandoned his nightly strolls down that street, because he encountered so many of the townspeople walking there to stare at the Countess's lighted windows.

Feminine breaths were bated while the Countess settled her

household, and the planners of parties suspended operations until it could be determined whether the Countess would accept local invitations. Mr. Starr found the fuss understandable and natural, but he reminded his congregation, that first Sunday, that they should not render unto Caesar the things that were God's.

The second Sunday he met the Countess. She came to church dressed in a black suit that made other women's heads snap round smartly, her dark hair was drawn smoothly back under her hat, and she sat, in perfect attention, with her eyes fixed on her prayer book. It was not until after the service, when she stood in front of him at the church door, that Mr. Starr realized that she was a woman of over forty.

She said in impeccable English, " Can you come to supper this evening, Mr. Starr? I should like to become better acquainted. I understand there is no Mrs. Starr, or my invitation would include her, of course. Will eight o'clock suit you? I know you will not be back from church much before that. Good. I'll expect you."

He went for supper, diffidently, expecting stiff formality and perhaps even liveried footmen. Instead he encountered simplicity and enchantment. The Countess, now dressed in a simple frock, seemed younger than she had in church and treated him as if he were a member of her own generation, ignoring his white hair and clerical collar. Her manners were so beautiful that one was not aware of manners at all, only of a sense of refreshment and of being at one's best. She led him over the house, pointing out what she had done in the way of décor, and he observed that not once did she look in a mirror.

He admired, and tried not to envy, her complete lack of self-consciousness, and her poise.

" It's a very large house for just one woman," he said, following her back to the living-room.

" But it's so glorious to have space again. During the war, you see, we were interned in our château in Occupied France, and Nazi officers were billeted with us. It was not a large place, and with my husband, my two daughters, five officers, and Anna —you can imagine! I vowed then that never would I live in crowded quarters again, and even Anna agreed with me, thrifty as she is."

" Anna? "

" I suppose I should say she is my housekeeper, but she is much more than that. I am not practical, you know, I was brought up to be useless. Anna is my cook, my manager, my friend, my nurse—everything. And very intelligent. If I had my way she would be sitting here with us, talking, but she has

firm ideas about the fitness of things. She will bring in the wine presently; and then you shall meet her."

A large orange cat jumped up on the minister's knee and settled there, purring. "No, don't take him away. I like cats. Did you bring him with you?"

"Yes. He belongs to my elder daughter. The girls are just finishing their school in Switzerland and my husband will bring them along with him when he comes, this autumn, to open his office in San Francisco."

Mr. Starr felt a distinct bereavement. "Then you will not be staying here permanently?"

"No. Just for six months. This is just a little holiday for me. I have travelled so much that I longed to live for a while in a pretty, quiet town. So my husband's agent—the one who found us the house in San Francisco, which will not be ready until autumn—found this place for me. Anna and I love it already."

"Your cat likes it, too." He smiled down at the throbbing animal on his knee. "I understand that scientists are not sure what the purring mechanism is, but this cat has a very good one."

"Oh, I can purr, too," said the Countess astonishingly. She rose from her chair and bent her throat towards his ear. Her lips, her mouth were motionless, but from somewhere inside her issued a genuine purring sound, a note or two higher than the cat's.

The incongruity of it made him laugh. "Amazing!" he said.

"I do it only when I'm very pleased, of course," she said, resuming her chair. "Ah, here is Anna."

Anna was a short sturdy woman with ash-blonde braids pinned tightly to her head. She dropped a respectful curtsy and set a glass of pale wine by the minister's hand. "It is very light," she said in a heavy foreign accent. "It will not hurt."

The Countess waved a hand towards a large painting that hung above the fireplace. "What do you think of that, Mr. Starr? Give me your honest opinion."

"I know very little about painting. I like the colours. They suit the room."

The Countess looked triumphant. "You see, Anna!"

"I cannot help it," said Anna simply. "Matisse and I will never be friends. Van Gogh, yes. Cézanne, yes. But Matisse, no. I am too old for Matisse."

"Seventy is not too old for Matisse. It is that you are excessively orderly. Everything must be just so, just right, and Matisse did not paint like that."

"I can see why you like him, madam, since excessive order is not one of your faults," said Anna, and both women burst into laughter.

Mr. Starr laughed with them. He sipped his wine and watched the Countess's animated face and talked more than he had in a long while. The only awkward pause came at supper when the Countess spoke of her neighbours.

"This Dr. Jamieson," she said. "What kind of man is he?"

The pastor set his coffeecup down carefully. "I—I don't really know the man. He comes to church every Sunday morning and shakes hands with me when he leaves." He hoped that neither his face nor his voice was betraying what an ordeal that handshake was for him, though his conscience would not let him avoid it. "I've never said two words to him, otherwise."

"He's an unfriendly man, I believe. Quite different from his wife."

His face brightened eloquently. "Yes, Mrs. Jamieson is most pleasant. I'm glad you've met her."

"I ran over there one night to ask for help with our stove. Anna has not cooked with electricity before. Mrs. Jamieson came back with me and was most helpful."

"You'll be good for her. She's so much alone. I hope you can be friends."

"We are friends. She comes every day now, but we have to be careful. Her husband does not approve."

"Why should he object?" said Mr. Starr indignantly.

"Exactly what Anna and I have been wondering," said the Countess. "I thought perhaps you could tell us."

"I'm sorry," he said lamely. "I can't." He was uncomfortably aware that, to so clever a woman as the Countess, his refusal to speak was quite as revealing as anything he might have said.

"The man has a bad aura," said the Countess. "You do not believe in bad or good auras, I suppose. Too spiritualistic for your cloth. But I smell malice in the wind that blows off Dr. Jamieson. I shall keep an eye on him."

Mr. Starr went away feeling remarkably relieved, for no reason that he cared to explain to himself; and later in the week, when he saw Mrs. Jamieson as she was about to enter the Ladies' Guild meeting, his admiration for the Countess increased. Mrs. Jamieson was radiant. Her eyes had lustre, her cheeks were pink. She laughed on the slightest provocation. Even her clothes were different, in some mysterious way.

"That's a charming dress," he said, smiling.

"Oh, thank you. It's one I've had for some time, really, but the Countess said it needed a touch of colour, so I— Imagine *your* noticing."

He remarked that he was not as eyeless in Gaza as some people

thought, and she smiled and went on talking about the Countess. " So many clever people are interested only in themselves, but she takes a real interest in everyone around her. Too much interest, Anna says, Anna scolds her for it."

" Considering that Anna appears to have devoted her whole life to another person, her argument loses force."

" She doesn't know how *good* it is to have someone interested in you," she said gratefully. " I had forgotten just how good it was."

To Mr. Starr, it was equally good to find people who were interesting. Always, when he called on the Countess, there was something that amazed or gratified him. If it was not the sight of the dignified Anna roaring down the drive towards the supermarket on a big, shiny motor cycle—" She learnt to ride one during the war," said the Countess, " and the motor cycle was simpler to transport than a car. I take taxis, myself "—it was the knowledge that he was the only man who was invited to the house.

" It would not be proper for Madam to receive since her husband is not in residence," Anna explained to him. " One's priest, of course, is considered an intimate friend of the whole family."

In time he became accustomed to these smaller surprises. But he never lost his astonishment over the conversations he had with the Countess.

Theology, for example, turned out to be a subject on which they were poles apart. Mr. Starr advocated the encouragement of the good that he felt lay in every soul; the Countess was all for the prompt suppression or extermination of the wicked. With approval, she recounted tales of the sudden deaths of Nazi officers at the hands of the citizens in whose houses they were quartered: tales of mysterious food poisonings, disappearances, cars that had been tampered with, a fatal fall down a flight of steps.

Mr. Starr hid his shock and reproved her for too flamboyant an imagination.

" The authorities believed that those deaths were from natural or explicable causes," he scolded. " You have no grounds for thinking otherwise."

She retrenched, but only to a point. " I'm certain about the fall down the steps," she said stubbornly. " Those stairs were *waxed*! "

He sighed. " Good housekeepers derive immense satisfaction from highly polished floors, I've noticed. I can't believe this affinity with wax to be a murderous tendency."

The Countess looked amused. " My dear Mr. Starr, being

a man, you probably don't know that the one place in a house that is never waxed is the staircase. The stupidest of maids would not do such a thing. Much less an experienced housekeeper."

He opened his mouth to say that no fall is necessarily fatal and that surely no one would have run such a tremendous risk. But a sudden picture came to him of a man sprawled at the foot of a staircase while a vague figure beat on his head with some heavy object, inflicting injuries that would also be blamed on the fall, and he decided to abandon the argument.

No matter what the subject, however, the Countess managed to startle him. About Mrs. Jamieson she said, "She is too good. A fine woman, but handicapped by goodness."

He nearly leapt from his chair. "How can goodness be a handicap! Am I devoting my life, then, to crippling people?"

Her smile was meek, demure. "What I mean is that, when a good person has to deal with a bad one, the bad one always wins. You have observed that?"

He said that he had observed no such thing, but she returned to the subject of Mrs. Jamieson. "Her husband doesn't even support her, did you know? She has an allowance from her mother. A small one, but still an allowance."

"Perhaps if she had had children—" he began.

"Oh, but the doctor doesn't want children. She told me. At least, he doesn't want them *now* and hasn't for the past ten years, but she's sure that he'll want them some day." She threw out her expressive hands. "You see? Faith, loyalty, she has all the virtues. And all they bring her is misery."

"She's looking far from miserable these days," he said defiantly.

"A temporary happiness, built on sand," sighed the Countess. "It cannot last, in the circumstances. You'll see."

He did see. Mrs. Jamieson's contentment lasted through Lent, but when she called at the rectory on Good Friday morning the bloom had vanished. Thin and haggard, all her pretty animation gone, she stared at him with desolate eyes.

"I came to tell you that we won't be able to make our usual Easter offering this year, Mr. Starr. My husband has had reverses—the stock market—"

He did his best to console her. "Many people are having to retrench, and your past generosity—"

She was not listening to him.

"It meant a great deal to me," she said in a flat, strained voice. "I—I can't tell you how I feel." She had gone before he could say another word.

On Easter morning Dr. Jamieson sat alone in his pew. "She's ill," thought the minister and, for once, was eager to talk to the man after service.

"Sally went to Georgia yesterday," said Dr. Jamieson impassively. "Don't know how long she'll be gone. Her mother's very ill."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Mrs. Claiborne's over seventy. Can't expect too much."

"I suppose you're going down later in the week?"

"No. Far too busy. I've no intention of trapesing off to Georgia, no matter what happens."

Mr. Starr took this to be an idiotic pose of some kind, but he was mistaken. Three days later the town buzzed with the news that Mrs. Claiborne was dead and that Dr. Jamieson was not stirring a step to be with his wife in her hour of trial. Nor did he answer his doorbell, though the minister rang several times and was positive that he heard movement within.

Feeling ineffectual, Mr. Starr went to consult the Countess. "I hesitate to impose myself where I'm not wanted. At the same time I don't want to fail in my duty. The man comes to church, he is one of our members—"

"Sheer façade," sniffed the Countess. "He won't let you in because the house probably shows traces of the things that have been going on there. The cheap women. The drinking. When his wife was at home there was nothing like that. Oh, he's being careful about it, but I am not easy to fool. Your Dr. Jamieson has one fault which clever, cold men often have: he thinks other people are much stupider than they are."

Uneasily, Mr. Starr avoided a discussion of Dr. Jamieson's new shortcomings and stuck to the problem. "He must know that his not going to the funeral will cause talk, a thing he has always shunned. Up to now."

"Mrs. Claiborne is dead," said the Countess simply. "She hated him, wouldn't allow him to set foot in her house. But as long as she was alive he had to behave himself a little, because there was always the disposition of her money to consider. Now he can do as he pleases."

"Surely that depends on Mrs. Claiborne's will. A woman of her means must have left one."

"Yes. We were talking about inheritances one afternoon and Sally told me about it." Mrs. Jamieson was to get everything, but with provisions. The house in Georgia was hers, only if she would live in it. The capital was to remain untouched for ten years, although she was to receive the interest, a considerable sum. "Poor Mrs. Claiborne," said the Countess soberly. "She

tried so hard to outwit her son-in-law that she didn't see the terrible thing she was bringing on her daughter."

Mr. Starr was confused. "But he can't touch the money. He doesn't get any of it."

Her voice was softly emphatic. "If his wife dies, he does."

He began to laugh, he couldn't help it. "That imagination of yours! For a nice woman, you have the strangest—"

"You can laugh if you like," she said indulgently. "I hope, when he tries to kill her, that I am still here. I may be able to prevent him."

"You're letting your dislike of the man—which I confess I share—run away with you. How do you conceive these nightmares?"

"I once lived in a nightmare, Mr. Starr. So I recognize one when I see it."

She went on, without a change of tone, to say that her garden was full of daffodils and that, when they bloomed, she would give an outdoor tea party in their honour.

"I'm afraid your party will have to take place without me. Chances are I'll be away, at the District Conference." He explained to her that the Conference was really a week of meetings, attended by all clergymen of a certain denomination, and that, this year, it was being held two hundred miles away. "I've been asked to make one of the speeches, and I must get busy and prepare it."

"It will be the very best speech of the whole Conference," she said with open affection.

Her confidence was warming, but when he began work on it the speech went badly. He struggled with it mightily, and Mrs. Jamieson, walking into his study one evening, made a pleasant interruption. He shook her hand cordially and said that it was good to have her back.

There was a new composure and decisiveness about her. She laid a cheque on his desk, without fluttering. "It's my Easter gift. I can afford it now."

She spoke of moving to Georgia in September. "Seeing the place again made me realize how much I love it. The lawyers have given me six months in which to take up residence. The doctor can settle his affairs here by then." Yes, her husband had agreed that the move was right, much as he disliked country living. "It's quite unselfish of him. Perhaps he sensed that I intended to be firm about it."

She pulled on her gloves, thoughtfully. "The Countess was right all along. She says that a doormat is made to be stepped on. I am no longer a doormat."

The transformation in her pleased him so much that he entitled his new speech *Personal Dimensions*, and was congratulated, on its delivery, by no less a personage than the bishop himself. Mr. Starr returned home more by cloud of glory than by train. It was nine at night when he reached his station and observed, for the first time, that it was raining.

Fantastically, Anna was waiting for him, under a black umbrella. "Please, Mr. Starr, Madam must see you at once. I have a cab waiting."

Her manner alarmed him, but all he could get out of her was that Mrs. Jamieson was very ill. "We must not talk about it here," she said, nodding at the cab-driver's back. "Wait."

The melodrama of the situation infected him against his better judgment. He nearly ran from the cab to the Countess's front door. She opened it promptly and drew him inside with hands that were like ice. "Thank God you've come. I wanted to send you a telegram, days ago, but Anna wouldn't let me."

"Is Mrs. Jamieson dead?"

"Not yet, but desperately ill, I think. Virus pneumonia, her husband says. He won't let me see her. He says it's contagious and he's nursing her himself."

She began to pace the floor. "No one can see her! She's completely at the mercy of that man."

"Has he called in another doctor?"

The Countess stopped short. "He's poisoning her! Would he call in another doctor?"

"I have tried to reason with you about these nervous obsessions of yours," he said sternly, "but now I am telling you flatly that it is wrong and dangerous to make accusations without evidence. You might be sued for slander, for defamation of character—"

She was not listening to him.

"It must be poison, it must be. Arsenic, I think. The symptoms are alike—vomiting, pain, irritation of the organs—you must go to the police! At once!"

"On a mere suspicion, not even my own?" He mopped his face with his handkerchief. "It would be scandalous! A clergyman is the last person in the world to bring unfounded charges."

"Then," she said despairingly, "I must stand here and let the poor soul die?"

Mistaken though she was, her earnestness moved him. "I think I can make Dr. Jamieson see that it would be wiser to take her to a hospital, if she's as ill as you say."

She almost rounded on him. "Yes! Yes! But give him an

alternative. Talk hospital, strongly. Then let up a bit and leave the rest to me. Where is my cape? Anna, you must come with us."

Afterwards Mr. Starr was never sure what had happened. He remembered the march of the small procession through the rain; the grudging way Dr. Jamieson opened the door and the dismay on his face when the Countess swept past him and into the house; the interview, with the four of them standing in the dusty living-room; the hatred in Dr. Jamieson's eyes, while his lips strove to be civil. He did not like the mention of the word "hospital," and he liked it less each time Mr. Starr said it. He was quite capable of handling the situation alone, he had given up his practice to nurse his wife through this thing.

As friends and neighbours, they could not permit such unnecessary self-sacrifice on his part. They were concerned for his welfare, as well as his wife's, and he needed a helping hand whether he knew it or not. Since he did not like the idea of removing his wife to a hospital, some other way to lighten his burden must be found.

The Countess provided the solution. "The least we can do is to take the housekeeping off your hands. I shall lend you Anna. About everything but housework she is very stupid, but she will do for that."

Dr. Jamieson was ready to make any small concession that would get rid of them. "That's very kind of you. If your Anna will come for a couple of hours a day—"

"No, no," cried the Countess. "She will live here until Mrs. Jamieson recovers. I will bring her things over in the morning."

Before he could protest she gathered her sable cape about her and moved to the door. "Let her sleep in your wife's room tonight, so you can get some rest. Good night, Anna. Take good care of our neighbours."

The moment they were outside again, she became slightly hysterical, laughing and crying softly as she walked along through the rain. "Your face when I said that Anna was stupid! It nearly gave everything away. But I had to make him think that she would observe nothing. You are too honest a man to make a good actor."

"I wasn't acting," he said severely, "and there was no reason for Anna to be stupid or to be left there at all, as far as I can see. The hospital was the best idea, but you interfered before I had brought him round to it."

She wiped the tears from her eyes and her voice was faintly exasperated. "What could the hospital have done for her?"

"Made her well, of course."

"And then?"

"Then she could come home."

"And then?"

"I don't know what then," he said irritably, "and neither does anybody else."

She stopped in the reflection of her own house lights and studied him, very seriously. "I do not agree with you that, if you ignore evil, it will go away. But I admire you for always believing the best about people. I think this is a habit of yours by now, you cannot change it if you try. Always you believe the best. Anyone who knows you can count on that."

The open praise embarrassed him. "You're shivering. Better get to bed." She turned obediently to the door, and he risked a little joke at her former fears. "No more visions of Dr. Jamieson sprinkling powders on his wife's food. I need some sleep myself."

"I am not worried any more," she said seriously. "My mind is quite at rest."

He glanced back at the lighted windows as he trudged down the drive. She was standing by her fireplace, the cape still about her, looking down at the heavy poker, which she held in her hands. He thought it probable that she didn't know what to do with the thing, and the picture of her tackling the fire, inexpertly but fiercely, amused him all the way home.

He was exceptionally busy the next day. A hundred duties carried him all over the town, and it was seven o'clock when, still supperless, he returned to the rectory. By then the message was two hours old. Dr. Jamieson had met with a fatal accident, a fall, and Mr. Starr was to come at once.

The door was opened for him by Sergeant Mayburn, whom he knew well from their mutual work on juvenile-delinquency cases. The police doctor had come and gone, the body had been removed, and Mrs. Jamieson had been attended by Dr. Powers from the hospital.

"Anna and the Countess are upstairs looking after her," said the Sergeant. "I didn't like to leave them all alone after a shock like that, so I was holding the fort till you showed up."

"I'll telephone some of my congregation to come and relieve them. They've done their part."

"Phone's in the hall, at the foot of the stairs." He led the way, skirting an area where the rug was damp. "That isn't blood or anything. Just soap and water. The Countess scrubbed it herself, the minute we said she could. Imagine, a countess down on her hands and knees with a scrubbing-brush. My men

were astonished. But she had to call Anna to make coffee for us. Imagine a woman not knowing how to make coffee!"

Mr. Starr was looking at the stairs, a disturbing memory nudging his mind. Hadn't he heard somewhere about an accident similar to this? But that other fall had been occasioned by waxed treads, while here a neat strip of green carpet ascended the middle, leaving four inches of bare wood on each side.

"Is this where it happened?" he asked.

"Yes. The carpet's perfect, you can see. So we figure that he stumbled over his own feet and took a header, or that he stepped on that polished wood on the side and slipped. Crashed down into this marble table here—there was blood all over one corner of it—and brought that big brass lamp and all right down on top of himself. Died almost immediately. Head injuries."

The minister bent to run a finger over the shining wood of the steps. It was smooth as glass, but, of course, the carpeting made it reasonably safe. If the carpeting had been there at the time . . . The idle viciousness of this thought made Mr. Starr jump as if he had been stuck with a pin. "Clean, aren't they?" the Sergeant was saying. "Anna's work. You know how these good housekeepers are. You could eat off the floor anywhere."

Mr. Starr's self-discipline asserted itself. He was not going to be guilty of the kind of wicked imagination he had deplored in the Countess. With an effort, he cleared his mind of memory and conjecture alike and resumed his proper duties as a man of God. "I'd better make my telephone calls," he said briskly.

"I'll be off, then. With a police department as small as ours, we always have plenty to do. If we'd been bigger, we might have nailed Jamieson years ago. Never could get any evidence on him." He jerked a thumb towards the ceiling. "A nice woman like Mrs. Jamieson. She's better off this-way."

Mr. Starr went up the stairs carefully, holding on to the banister. In the doorway of the sickroom he paused, listening to a soft, throbbing noise that filled the air.

The Countess sat, upright and watchful, by the bed. He stepped forward to inquire and to offer his sympathy. Her back was towards him, but he identified the sound, even so.

Unbelievably, the Countess was purring!

★ ★ ★

KEEPING POSTED

Traditions are like lamp posts. Wise men use them to guide their paths. Drunkards use them to support their instability.

VISCOUNT HAILSHAM

ROSARIO

She belonged to the forest
and the forest gave her to me

BY BRIAN CLEEVE

THE river curved ahead of us like a steel sword; flat and molten, hot and shining. The trees on the banks grew like dark green cliffs reaching up to the brass-bright African sky, and the banks themselves were raw red scars of earth, where the huge whiplash of the last flood had torn them. The sound of the launch's motor was lost in the immense stillness, hardly seeming to reach to the stern sheets where I sat, the tiller under my arm.

Only if you listened hard could you hear Africa breathing; the sharp chak-chak of a monkey high up in one of the trees, the sudden scream of a bird far in the distance as it saw a leopard's shadow. And always the river, whispering against the launch. But over all, the silence, like a threat. This is Africa, it murmured, Africa, and you are strangers.

Hanlon, standing in the bows, made a small gesture with his right hand and I leaned on the tiller, swinging us away from an invisible mudbank.

" Keep her like that now," Hanlon said. " Fifty yards from the right bank, thirty from the left."

He turned and squatted down on the deck housing, and the girl stirred at his feet, looking up like a puppy that hopes to be noticed and treated kindly. He reached out his boot and rested it on her shoulder, the big, mud-scarred logging-boot with its steel cleats looking like some act of violence against the small, soft cloud of her hair and the thinness of her shoulder.

" Please," she said, " please, Jerry, you are hurting me."

But she didn't move away from him, and he didn't lower his boot. Only smiled at her, the black, handsome eyes narrowing, the almond-white teeth glistening. He threw his head back and rested his arms on the thwarts, big shoulders looking even bigger in the faded khaki shirt, looking over the girl's bent head at me, measuring me.

" Rosario here's the only white girl within a hundred miles. And me and her old man are the only white men. Or we were, until today."

It sounded like a warning, and I waited for him to go on, but he didn't say any more. Only looked down at the girl again, reaching out a big hand to twist a strand of her hair between his fingers.

Even just looking at it I knew how soft it must be. Soft and warm as silk.

It was a long time since I'd touched a girl's hair. Down in the last logging-camp I'd been in there hadn't been any white women at all, not even a hundred miles away. Only the big trees, and the Africans. And now the company had transferred me three hundred miles north, to Hanlon's camp. Two hundred miles in a light plane like a tin bucket with wings. Eighty miles in a lorry over red earth tracks through virgin forest that even we hadn't touched as yet. And now the last twenty up the river in Hanlon's launch.

He'd been only a name to me before I came. "Hanlon, the big black-haired feller up the Ife River." And the camp had been only a dot on the company map, with a jagged line round it marking the extent of the concession, and two little parallel lines showing where a bridge crossed the river.

And now, for eighteen months, Hanlon was going to be my boss.

I wondered what the girl was to him, turning over the obvious suggestion in my mind and throwing it away. She seemed too young, for one thing, although that doesn't mean much in Africa, and maybe she wasn't such a child after all. Seventeen? Maybe eighteen. I'd thought she was a child at first because Hanlon hadn't bothered to introduce us.

"Oh, her," he'd said, when I was throwing my gear into the launch. "That's Rosario, the daughter of the old guy who keeps the cantina at the Ife bridge. I bring her to steer when I'm alone. She's better than one of the native boys. They always think they're in a canoe and try to start paddling when I shout."

But she wasn't a child. Her figure was lost in the shabby, blue-and-white-checked man's shirt and the boy's khaki shorts that she was wearing, but her legs were smooth and brown; long and straight as a boy's and yet unmistakably a girl's; a warmth and richness in their tan that only a Spanish girl could have had in that bleaching, sodden heat.

I could feel the sweat running like warm oil under my shirt where I was leaning against the bulwark, and on the palm of my hand where it rested on the tiller. But she looked almost cool, as if she belonged to the heat and the molten gold of the sunlight and the serene blue of the sky.

All that was wrong was that arrogant mud-red boot resting on

her shoulder, and the submissiveness of her back as she looked up at Hanlon. But if she didn't mind, it was nothing to do with me. And it suddenly came to me that that was why Hanlon had put his boot there in the first place. To show me that it was nothing to do with me.

It's going to be a long eighteen months, I thought, and made myself look away from them. At the river. At the twin walls of the forest, a shade closer together now than they had been. At a crocodile lying half asleep like an obscene brown tree-trunk on a greasy ridge of mud near the right bank. He lifted his snout as we came round the bend and slithered into the water, fifteen feet of death sliding into the quiet, mirror surface of the river without a ripple, until only the small black bosses of his eyes and snout were showing.

"We're nearly there," said Hanlon, half turning. "You should see the bridge in a minute." And as he said it the bridge seemed to spring across the sky, thin as a spider's web and dazzling as silver; spars and beams and filaments of silver arching up from the dark mass of the forest and curving down again to the far bank like a bow-shot falling.

Beneath it, suspended by wire ropes as thin and dark as pencil strokes on the blue, shimmering air, hung the bridge itself; a catwalk that seemed to curve infinitesimally downwards towards its centre, fifty feet above the glittering river.

"Home!" said Hanlon, scrambling to his feet. "Welcome to Ife River camp."

But he wasn't looking at me as he said it. He was standing on the deck housing, legs straddled, his head thrown back, as if he were posing for a film shot, although apart from the girl and me there wasn't anyone to pose for except a bunch of Africans gathering on a wooden jetty near one foot of the bridge.

We could hear their voices as we came curving in to the bank, and a sudden chak-chatter of laughter as one of them missed the line that Hanlon had thrown to him.

"Shut up, you grinning ape!" Hanlon said, with a sudden astonishing viciousness in his voice. "Stop laughing, will you!" He didn't bother to recoil the line. Just leapt for the jetty as we came alongside, and went up the slope with long, impatient strides.

"He get mad when things like that happen," said Rosario apologetically. "Everything must be just right, just like a picture. He throw the line so well, the boy should catch it well too, and he get mad when the boy is so foolish."

It was the first time she had really spoken to me direct; I'd scarcely noticed her voice before. Now I was aware of it as

something beautiful. Cool and clear as well water, making the half-broken English seem an added beauty, like the tiny blemish that makes perfection bearable. She looked at me and smiled, not with the submissive anxiety to please and be noticed that showed in her smile for Hanlon. It was a friendly smile she gave me. As if we were equals, two children who had met in the uneasy shadow of a grown-up and were suddenly left alone to like one another. " How old are you? " she said.

We had climbed onto the jetty by now and the Africans were heaving my kit ashore and standing round us in a brown circle, waiting to be noticed. I smiled at them, and they smiled back.

" Guess," I said, and watched her mouth as she was thinking, her forehead frowning a little as she looked at me, at my red hair and my battered face and my thick chunk of a body that was hardly taller than hers. With a little chill in my heart I wished that it could have been quite a different face and body she was looking at; tall and fine and princely. Like Hanlon's, I thought, looking up the long slope to where he was already small in the distance, disappearing into the door of a whitewashed, tin-roofed building beside the end of the bridge.

" Twenty? " she guessed, but I knew from her eyes that she was only teasing me.

" Twenty-five," I said flatly, suddenly tired of the game. It would seem very old to her, and she might not even believe me, because seven years in logging-camps had hammered a lot of age into my face.

" I am eighteen," she said, walking beside me up the path. Then she looked at me sideways. " Well, very nearly eighteen. In a month's time. We're going to have a birthday party, and there'll be four of us now that you've come. I think . . . I think," she whispered, " that Jerry has bought me a present." She nodded her head towards one of the duffel bags the Africans were carrying, that didn't belong to me. " I saw him get it from the truck-driver."

Her voice changed as she said Hanlon's name, dropping a note as if it were something holy. I thought of his boot on her shoulder, and the look in his eyes whenever he bothered to glance at her; a look almost of ownership, like a man looking at a dog he's quite proud to possess.

But it was no good thinking about that. Or telling her that it wasn't a present for her in the duffel. Only cigarettes and whisky that Hanlon had wired me to bring for him.

" Have you always lived here? " I asked her.

" Except when I went to the mission school down-river," she said. She sighed luxuriously, glancing at the blinding sky and

round her at the forest that here retreated from the river a hundred yards or so, leaving a clearing of rough, dust-red grass surrounding the bridge-span and the low, white-walled building we were making for.

" But I don't go any more," she said. " I'm grown-up now."

And she danced half a dozen steps ahead of me, holding the turn-ups of her shorts as if they were the hem of a ballet frock. She twirled on the last step and bowed to me, and there, right behind hér, like a pale shadow of anger in the doorway of the building, was Hanlon.

" I see you got acquainted," he said, and Rosario cringed at the harshness in his voice.

Her face had gone white, as if she expected to be struck, and I felt my chest tighten, the way it does when something's going to happen. But Hanlon only turned on his heel and went back inside. And Rosario slunk after him, not looking at me, her eyes beseeching his back for a kind look, for a word.

I became conscious of the Africans watching us. Quiet as the forest trees and as impersonal, and yet seeing everything that happened, and weighing it in their African scales that can find the hidden hollowness, the secret flaw in a white man through the tone of his voice, the way he walks. Suddenly I wanted to be free of their eyes. I didn't want to be judged. What the hell was the girl or Hanlon to me? What did I care? I was here to fell timber, nothing else.

I shouldered through the door sideways, as I have to into most doorways unless they're built pretty wide, and the coolness and the shadow fell on me like nightfall, so that for a moment I couldn't see. Only smell. Earth first, like a cave. And then wine, and garlic, and Spanish tobacco.

Slowly the shadows took shape round me. Rose-washed walls darkened with lamp smoke and years of dust blown through the empty window frames by the wind. A long wooden counter and a shelf behind it with a row of winebottles and a dozen glasses. A small fat man, with thinning black hair and a face round and yellow as the moon, was pouring out a drink for Hanlon. Beyond him, Rosario was tying a red apron round her waist with fumbling, nervous fingers.

" Galina," said the fat little man, bobbing his head. " Welcome to Ifeville, Señor—Señor—? "

" Adams," I said. " But all my friends call me Red."

I tipped my hair with my fingers and grinned at him, because I liked the look of him, and I wanted to like somebody in the place if I was going to stay there eighteen months. He grinned

back, and suddenly I could see a likeness to his daughter . . . just the whiteness of the teeth maybe, and the gentleness of the smile, like a child smiling.

" O.K., Señor Rrredd," he said. " What you drinking? "

" Beer," I said, " if you've got it. Long and cool."

" For a short hot guy? " said Hanlon. The words fell flat and heavy as coins on the bar counter and brought a kind of stillness with them.

" O.K., O.K.," said Galina hurriedly. " I guess I find some beer." He was sweating with anxiety.

Rosario went behind the counter in a swift flurry, her hands reaching for a glass, a bottle, an opener, her eyes beseeching me not to make trouble—not because she thought it might harm Hanlon if it came, that was unthinkable, and far less because it might harm me, which hardly mattered, but because it would spoil a great occasion, a new person arriving. It should be almost a fiesta. And would be if only I kept quiet, her eyes begged of me.

I realized it was just that that Hanlon resented. That anyone's arrival should matter when he was there. That Rosario should talk to me instead of dumbly following at his heels as she must always have done before. That her father should make a ceremony of welcoming me. That he should no longer be the only cock to crow.

And I knew then that it wouldn't matter what I did. So far as Hanlon was concerned I'd never put a foot right until I went down-river again. There wasn't room for two men in his kingdom. I felt his arrogance and resentment and contempt like the back of a hand across my mouth. I felt the blood thicken and burn in my face and my hand began to clench on the bar. And then something cold touched my fingers.

" Your beer," Rosario whispered. " Good and cold, no? " She was smiling at me, not as she had outside, but in a frightened way, as if she felt the cockleshell of her world breaking round her.

" Thanks," I said heavily. " Well, here's the long cold beer for the short hot guy."

I felt the tension in the room relaxing like a breath let out in a hushed sigh, and I looked sideways at Rosario to see if her eyes were thanking me. But she was looking at no one, only polishing a damp patch on the bar with a corner of her red apron.

Hanlon laughed, coolly insolent. " You're more sensible than you look," he said. " Maybe we'll get on together."

" I've a job to do," I said. " I came here to do it. Nothing else."

" You keep it that way," said Hanlon, " and we'll get along

fine." He was almost smiling now, almost warm, because he'd won a victory, because the man who had seemed for a moment to threaten his kingdom had turned out to be a willing subject.

" Have a drink," he said, and his voice was buoyant, patronizing. " This is a celebration. Galina, get your squeeze-box out. We're going to dance."

" O.K., O.K., I get it right now. Right now, Señor 'Anlon."

He ferreted under the bar and brought the squeeze-box up like a porpoise surfacing with a fish; a shabby old accordion with a strap gone green with damp and the silver inlay tarnished black as ebony.

" Rosa, Rosa! " he said, snapping his fingers, " quick, dance with Señor 'Anlon; iss waiting for you; quick, girl."

She came out from behind the bar, her face flushing with pleasure that everything was all right again, that the cockleshell hadn't broken after all.

I slid my glass across the bar. " You don't need me for this," I said. " I think I'll turn in. Maybe one of the boys will show me where I sleep and bring me some supper? "

" Sure, sure," said Galina. He already had the strap of the accordion round his neck and his fingers on the keys. He had begun playing before I reached the door, and I knew that he was afraid not to, afraid to come with me and show me the way in case Hanlon started something again. Hanlon didn't even bother to watch me go, just threw a good-night over his shoulder to his new subject.

But for a moment, as a shaft of the swiftly dying sun lit Rosario's face through the window, she looked at me, her eyes dark as charcoal, beside Hanlon's big, bare, suntanned forearm, her face pale ivory except where the sunset tinged it, and she didn't look quite as she had before when she was with Hanlon. Had something of the submissiveness gone? Something of the unquestioning admiration?

The dance whirled her into shadow, and I went out to find my hut, the music following me across the clearing.

For days after that I hardly spoke to Rosario. Being new, I had a lot to do, getting to know the timber stands, and the boys, and the machinery. Half the time I was miles away from the bridge, marking trees and cutting. I'd see her only in the evenings when I came into the cantina for a drink, and then Hanlon would be there, too, and I couldn't say much to her in case it started trouble again.

But sometimes she'd give me a small, almost secret smile, as if she was reminding me of something that only we shared, and

I'd remember the few minutes we'd been together, walking up from the jetty to the cantina, and feel a warmth inside me. But the rest of the time I'd either keep quiet or talk to Galina, and listen to him telling soft little unconvincing lies about how rich he had been in Andalusia.

Apparently he had come out to West Africa with his new wife when the Civil War broke out in Spain, and I guessed that he had stayed on because he'd never saved enough money to leave. Within three years Rosario had been born and his wife had died, and he might have gone home then if the World War hadn't made travelling with a baby almost impossible.

Then, too, the war had brought a momentary prosperity to Ifeville. There had been a detachment of soldiers guarding the bridge, and a thin stream of traffic travelling north and south and stopping at the cantina for jerry-cans of petrol and demijohns of wine.

"But now, señor," Galina shrugged fat, hopeless shoulders, "now if we have two trucks through in a week it is something, and always black men driving with no money to spend for wine."

He looked across the room to where Rosario was putting a dish of salami in front of Hanlon, and I knew what he was thinking. Either Rosario must marry Hanlon, or no one. And he probably knew as well as I did how much chance there was of that.

"The white man is finished in this part of Africa," said Galina. "Finito. Kaput." He spat on the floor and rubbed the spit with his bare foot.

"Hey," said Hanlon, calling across the room, "I'm going down-river tomorrow, Adams. Get them trees marked in the stand across the bridge. The big ones." He liked to save his orders until we were in the cantina and Rosario and her father could provide an audience.

"All right," I said.

"I come with you, Señor 'Anlon, no?" said Galina. "I go mad if I stay here one more day wit'out seeing some different thing. Rosa will mind the big crowd of customers O.K." He gave a depressed laugh, and mopped at a ring of spilt wine with his sleeve.

Rosario said nothing. Only bent her head so that the soft cloud of her hair shadowed her eyes and face. Was she disappointed at being deprived of her day with Hanlon, the careless whistle to her to follow him, the boot resting on her shoulder? I couldn't tell.

I stood on the bridge and watched them going the next morning, the launch curving its silver path down-river between the green walls of forest, Galina steering, Hanlon standing like a god

in the bows. And even at that distance you could tell he was conscious of the picture he made: a king on progress to the boundaries of his kingdom.

I turned away from the rail and followed the timber gang along the bridge, the catwalk swaying under me with the wind that always blew there, the huge wires murmuring. Then the launch was gone, and the bridge fell behind me, and we were in the forest; the tall trees closing out the sky, the morning sunlight turning to warm, moist shadows, like the brown, deep-moulded leaves under our feet.

The boys went on to the felling stand and I was suddenly alone, their footsteps rustling for a moment, a laugh blending with the forest sounds, and then nothing at all, as if I were the only human being in the world. A bird like a bright green shuttlecock flew clumsily between two trees. Something whispered among the leaves. The forest might have been Eden when Adam was first made.

But it's not good for a man to be alone. I thought of Rosario, and of Hanlon, and wanted to break something in my hands. But what could I do? Make the trouble that was waiting to be made? It would be Rosario and her father who would suffer then, her one frail chance of marrying Hanlon blown sky-high.

If I were a different man. If I were tall and had a different face. I felt my cheeks and broken nose with my fingers, and my twisted mouth, where the sailor in Accra had used his boots, and I laughed at myself.

Then I swung the axe at a fallen log and drove the blade so deep that it quivered.

If Hanlon had been there that second I would have killed him.

" Red . . . Red . . . where are you? "

I lifted my head and listened, not believing it.

" Red . . . Red . . ." The leaves rustled as she ran.

Even then I didn't answer, as if I was still afraid that it was only a trick of sound, a bird calling. Until twenty yards away between the trees I saw the flicker of a dark green shirt.

" Rosario," I said. Not very loud, but she heard me. She turned and came towards me as if she belonged to the forest and the forest had given her to me, her bare legs bronze as the fallen leaves, her shirt green as the dark lianas twisting down beside her from the trees. And her hair dark as the shadows among the leaves.

" Rosario," I said again. Just to say it. To hear it said.

She was carrying a blue billy-can in one hand and a yellow basket in the other, with wine and bread and salami in it.

" I brought your breakfast," she said, and she smiled at me

the way she had smiled those few moments walking up the path from the launch to the cantina, long, long ago. Then, " They've gone," she said. " Gone for the day." And she held the billy-can and the basket at arm's length and danced two steps among the leaves, her head half bent, her eyes looking at me sideways. " Oh, it is nice here among the trees."

I took the can and the basket from her and put them down, and stood awkwardly, not knowing what to say. A huge red butterfly went by and she tried to catch it with her hands.

" Are you happy here? " she said, looking at me over her shoulder. The butterfly flew up out of her reach and the rich red of its wings turned black as the shadows took it.

" No," I said. " Not very."

" Neither am I," she said. " Not happy at all." And suddenly she was crying, standing in the middle of the small clearing by the fallen log, with her fingers up to her mouth and her eyes like wet charcoal smears, each with a silver heart of tears in it.

" Oh Rosario," I whispered, and put my arms round her, very gently, for fear of crushing her, and then harder, holding her tight against my chest, feeling the soft warmth of her hair against my mouth. I bent my head and she turned her face up to me, and I kissed her eyelids, tasting the tears, warm and salt as blood.

I felt like a bear, like a gorilla that has a bird in its hands, and I let her go in a sudden terror that I had hurt her, cupping her hands in my palms, and drawing back from her so that I could see her face.

" Did you mind? " I said. " Did you mind my kissing you? "

She shook her head and laughed at me a little through her tears. " I have wanted it a long time," she said. " Ever since the first day. But I was afraid . . ."

" Of Hanlon? "

" A little . . . but mostly of you. In case—" she hung her head, not looking at me—" in case you'd think . . . The Sisters at the mission school said only bad girls wanted men to kiss them . . . changed from one boy to another . . . Am I bad? Very bad? " she whispered.

I wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. " Kiss me again and I'll tell you," I said. And she came against my heart as if she fitted there, flesh of my flesh. " I thought you loved him," I said.

She shook her head, moving it only a little it was held so tight against my shoulder.

" Then why did you let him treat you like that? " I said. Not that I cared any more. Not about that. Not about anything.

" There was only him," she whispered. " Except for my father,

he's the only white man I've ever really known. I thought that was the only way a girl could be treated . . . until you came. And then as soon as I saw you I knew that you were different—that you would be different. Only I was afraid . . ."

"Don't be afraid any more," I said softly. "Never again."

A thin sword-blade of sunlight came probing down through the cathedral roof of leaves and branches, and found us where we were standing, a sudden coin of hot gold on my face, on Rosario's dark, soft hair, on the green shoulder of the old, patched man's shirt that she was wearing. Down her slim back as the sun lifted. Creeping across the dark leaves to the fallen log. Up its rough bulk towards the steel blade of the axe.

We must have stood there a long time, our hearts against one another until they fell into a rhythm, like one heart beating in two breasts. Maybe we should have stood like that for ever.

Then, between one heartbeat and the next, there was the sound of a man's tread. Not an African on soft, bare feet. But a man whose booted feet crunched on the dead leaves as he came. I lifted my head, slowly.

And there was Hanlon, coming between the trees.

He started running the second he saw us, and that same second the moving blade of sunlight caught the steel of the axe in a sudden shimmer of blinding brightness. He changed direction and dived for it, his hand already curved to fit the haft, and death in his face. Not only ours, but his too, as if Rosario's treachery had struck him mortally.

I pushed Rosario behind me with a sweep of my left hand and leapt for the log, but his hands were on the axe haft first, wrenching, wrenching it out of the rotten wood, and it came up in a tight, hard swing as I reached him.

I grabbed his wrists, and he tried to kick my legs from under me, so I dropped to my knees. He came down with me, and we were both kneeling by the log, the axe glittering above my head. He spat in my face and I laughed at him, twisting my hands until I could hear the bones of his wrists cracking.

Suddenly he screamed with the pain of it, and the axe fell out of his fingers, the edge gashing my shoulder as it fell. I began to force him back. Back and back until he was ready for the killing stroke. I looked up and found Rosario kneeling beside us, her face white as death, her small hands clenched under her heart.

"Shall I finish it?" I said, and waited.

My hands felt like iron, as if they were machines to crush and crush, until bone and flesh and blood were only pulp beneath my fingers. Because this man had had the treasure that I loved, and rested his boot on it, and whistled it to heel like a dog.

"Shall I kill him?" I said, and all the time I waited for her answer, Hanlon looked at neither of us. Only at the high green roof of the leaves.

"No," Rosario whispered at last. "No, oh no." And she looked down at him with infinite pity in her face, as if she was looking at her vanished childhood. Then she covered her face with her hands and began to cry; deep, tearing crying, the way a woman cries.

I opened my fingers slowly and found that there was blood on them. I got to my feet and stood back from Hanlon, and he bent forward where he knelt, trying to nurse his ruined wrists.

"Go," I said, "go, before I change my mind." He stumbled to his feet. But even then he couldn't quite believe that his kingdom was ended. He stood for a moment looking at Rosario, as if he still expected her to come to him, to follow at his heels when he went. And for all that endless moment I held my breath, while Rosario met his eyes.

Then, very gently and slowly, she shook her head. "Not any more," she whispered. "Not ever again, my poor, poor Jerry. Go with God."

He turned and went away, the dead leaves scuffling at his steps, his shoulders stooping, his wrists pressed against him.

Much later that day, when we went back to the cantina, Rosario's father told us how he had come back, and packed, and gone, all in an hour.

"Two miles down-river this morning," Galina said, "we find we forget extra petrol cans, so we turn back. And there's Rosario gone. So . . . Señor 'Anlon, he go off to look for her,—and then, just half hour later, back he come. Not speak to me, to anyone. Just throw everything into the launch and go."

A month later a company message reached me, after winging its slow passage across six thousand miles, telling me that Hanlon had resigned and that I was acting manager of the Ife camp.

But all that was far, far away, a million years, a million miles away from Eden, from Rosario and me alone among the trees. I watched Hanlon go until the last flicker of his dark head and khaki shirt was hidden, and the last rustle of his feet was lost.

Then I turned to Rosario, to take even the shadow of him from her face, like a new king entering his kingdom.

★ ★ ★

IN BRIEF?

A successful lawsuit is the one worn by a policeman.

ROBERT FROST

THE FOURTH MAN

It was a pretty slick idea but dangerous

BY HOLLY ROTH

THERE was something wrong with the set-up—something didn't fit.

He pulled out the bottom drawer of his desk and propped his feet on its edge; then he sat and stared at the smudgy proofs. But the trouble wasn't in the article itself; he had made a good job of it. The proofs showed a full-page title, *Where Are the Child Wonders Now?* There was the box by a " famous psychiatrist," there were the pictures of Alphonso Peter Leonard he had had taken a few days before. And Leonard, looking lanky and engaging, added to the piece. It was a good layout.

It was, taken all together, good Sunday-paper stuff. The million Sunday readers in Pennsylvania and New York would lap it up. But still Blake wasn't happy about it. Something—about Leonard? about Leonard's apartment?—didn't add up.

The city room of the paper was almost empty—it was noon on Saturday—and the quietness bothered him. City rooms are never very noisy. For one thing, the ceilings are usually too high, and everybody is concentrating—on business or something else. Nevertheless, there is a kind of punctuated bustle. Although the punctuation changes from moment to moment, there is always some distracting element—one reporter yelling to another, a typewriter that not only clacks but rebounds with a tired grunt at every touch, a loud-mouthed fellow on a phone . . . One learns to overcome the noises, and that Saturday, with nothing to overcome, Blake found it hard to concentrate.

Another distraction was the lack of light. Heaven knows he had had enough practice working in spite of that handicap. As he sat peering by the desk-lamp's light at the blurred proofs, he started up his usual grouse. Why should he sit bang in the middle of the big room, so that the tall windows on three sides were all twenty feet from him? He wasn't the last to be taken on; three men had come in after him. But the boss always looked weary when Blake mentioned moving to another desk. And the boss wasn't the only one who didn't like him; not a single fellow

in that room was worth the powder to blow him to hell—although that would have been a good spot for all of them.

Blake's eyes had returned to the proof and he was again trying to pitch on the note that was out of key when the features editor came in and started towards his own cubby-hole. He walked straight ahead, seeming oblivious of everything except his destination; it was obvious that, in spite of the room's echoing emptiness, he was going to pretend he hadn't seen Blake.

Blake yelled, " Hey, Ed."

Ed Vorst stopped and turned slowly, and there, staring at Blake, was the weary look.

Blake ignored it. He said, " How do you like the piece? The first in the prodigy series? "

Vorst's weariness soured into irritation. " I haven't complained, have I? I'm running it."

" Yes, but I wondered if you liked it."

Vorst said, " Listen, you manage to get more money for less work than anyone else in the place. While you're at it, you get in everyone's hair. And now you want compliments, too? " The whole row of flimsy partitions shook as he slammed his door behind him. All Blake could do was concentrate on the day that would come. That day when he could kick them all in the teeth. Somewhere, somehow, he would find a money angle, a pay-off gimmick, a short cut to success. Money . . .

And then it hit him. That was it, that was what was wrong with the Leonard set-up. It was too plushy. There was too much money. Where was all the money coming from?

He had been given the assignment three weeks earlier. It was to be routine Sunday-paper stuff—a series of articles, all under the same title. Each week Blake was to resurrect the story of some flash-in-the-pan prodigy and, under subtitles like *From Beethoven to Bartender* tell, in pseudo-scientific terms, the story of the child's fantastic success and his subsequent failure to fulfil this promise of genius.

It was a good editorial gimmick. Child prodigies intrigue people. They have a triple appeal: first, there's the simple pull towards children; second, prodigies have something of the unhealthy fascination of side-show freaks; and third, they inspire an unadmitted envy the side-show doesn't. No one wants to weigh twenty stone, but when a five-year-old tot can multiply ten-digit numbers in his head, or conduct *Aïda*, then the average man thinks, What's ticking over in that kid's cranium that isn't ticking in mine?

To this triple attraction, Blake had been instructed to add an irresistible fourth; the articles were to satisfy the readers' human

nature by showing that the prodigies, no longer cute kids, had got what was coming to them.

The natural for the lead-off, of course, was Alphonso Leonard. No other prodigy ever had such scope, such an unbelievable variety of abilities.

Blake brought himself up to date in the " morgue," the paper's library. Alphonso Leonard, at seven, had made his piano debut at Carnegie Hall. The critics' reviews still glowed from the cuttings in the file. At eight, Alphonso was awarded a scholarship at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. When he was ten, he went into two months' retirement, and it was only by a fluke that his emergence was recognized as being coincidental with the famous *History of the World*, the well-written, masterly volume that was the standard textbook in many colleges and universities for ten years after.

The cuttings on Alphonso went along like that until 1940, when he was fourteen. He had followed his *History* with the *Definitive Analysis of Politics in the United States* and a half-dozen other accomplishments, all—with the exception of one—masterfully done. The one exception was sculpture. Alphonso was an amateur sculptor. If he had been anyone else, he might have been considered good. As it was, he was considered mildly promising. At fourteen, after the publication of his *Human Relationships*, he stopped producing, and stopped being news.

So Alphonso Leonard was the number-one lead. But although Blake was an excellent bloodhound, it took him a week to find Leonard. Apparently Leonard had done nothing to encourage anonymity; he had simply slipped into mediocrity—but that's such a large category it makes sifting difficult. Also, he had begun to call himself " Alf," and the public utilities had converted that into " Alfred."

Then when Blake did find him—or, at least, when he had tracked down a Leonard who seemed a likely prospect—he was never at home. Blake began to feel that he was going to spend the rest of his life questioning the caretaker and watching the windows of the fourth-floor front of the converted brownstone house at 472 West Seventy-third Street.

But when he pushed the button of Apartment 4A at eight o'clock sharp on the fourth morning of his vigil, the door opened.

The man who stood there was youngish, about thirty, very tall, and there was something—a kind of shy but rugged good looks—that made Blake think the boss would have liked him. That didn't make Blake warm to him particularly.

Blake said, " Alphonso Leonard? "

An odd second followed. The man in the doorway had been smiling rather tentatively. The smile went away, and his eyes seemed to open a little wider. Blake had a feeling that his own thirty-seven years had been correctly estimated and that the hole in the toe of his left sock was a known factor.

But the second passed, the shutter in the man's eyes clicked, and the eyes relaxed to a narrower gauge as his smile returned. He said, " Well, not many people call me that, but it *is* my name." He held the door open. " Come in."

It turned out to be quite a place—well-furnished, with a lot of books and pictures, and some interesting pieces of sculpture. Blake contrasted it with his own shabby rooms and thought that he wouldn't have minded having it himself.

Leonard led him into the kitchen, pushed a coffeecup into Blake's hand, and as he busied himself over a frying-pan, said, " I didn't know reporters ever got up as early as this."

So he was a smart alec. Blake said, " I hadn't mentioned that I'm a reporter."

There was a pause while Leonard gave him a fast brace of eggs with some kind of fancy ham fencing them in, and sat down to his own breakfast. Then he said, " No one else would call me Alphonso. Simple as that."

" I see. But I've got the right person? "

" Well—I'm the healthy, normal remains of that fouled-up kid, if that's what you're looking for."

So it began to look as if Blake's series was off to a good start. Leonard had practically written the subhead for him.

" Look," Leonard-added, " as I remember you newspapermen, nothing short of a top-secret label will stop you. And that doesn't always work. So I'll tell you whatever you want to know —though I can't imagine why you should be interested in me— but there's a ' but.' " He looked at Blake earnestly and persuasively, but Blake wasn't falling for any popularity approach. He asked what the catch was.

" If you're going to print anything about me, please leave out the address, and leave out the Alf—it has almost the force of an alias. When I was a kid you newspaper fellows gave me a pretty bad time of it. I was doing what seemed normal and enjoyable to me, and I was made to feel as if I were someone in a circus. How would you have liked it if every time you played marbles you got a big headline? "

That remark sounded like a crack, especially as, at seven years, Blake had been playing marbles. But a promise was cheap, so Blake said, " O.K., it's a deal. I don't want much, anyway. Just how you live, and how you feel about things." He gave

Leonard a judiciously edited explanation of the projected series of articles.

Alf Leonard picked up Blake's second cup of coffee and his own and led the way into his book-filled living-room. The room had windows on three sides, and it was sunny and warm. Blake relaxed as Leonard installed him in a deep chair, and gave him a cigarette and a statement.

" I minded my childhood a lot," he said. " I always felt that all that was different about me was that I had a superabundance of energy. Anyone can learn anything or do anything if they have energy enough."

Blake let that ride. Maybe it was a modesty gambit. Maybe it was on the level. Leonard seemed to believe it, but his opinion on the causes of genius was beside the point.

" I've felt since that if my ability had been restricted to one field, they'd have left me alone—comparatively. I'd have given *anything* to be left alone." He spent an introspective moment looking sorry for himself—just because he'd got some headlines, Blake thought sardonically—and then he went on.

" Well, it doesn't matter any more. I outgrew it all. I'm thirty-one. Since I was twenty-two I've been earning a living by my sculpture. I'm not very good at it, but I enjoy it and do well enough to manage. In there—" he gestured over his shoulder at an archway behind him—" I sculpture originals of ' novelties,' as they are called in the trade. I sell 'em to pottery companies, and they mass-produce them. I make—oh, it varies between seventy and a hundred and ten dollars a week, and that's enough for me. I'm not married, and, as you may remember, I've got no family."

Blake nodded. By craning his neck he could see into the little studio adjoining the living-room. Small dead-white pieces of sculpture, sculptors' tools, some wooden pedestals . . .

It was a good angle. Of all his facets, Alphonso Leonard had matured into the one in which he was least proficient. As in the case of so many promising amateurs, he had become a mediocre pro.

The little black panther on the table beside Blake had been on the periphery of his consciousness since he entered the room. It was done in ebony, he decided; a small but flowing jewel of a beast with such beauty of line, from its alert ears to the ominous stance of its tail, that it continually caught his eye.

He indicated the small figure and said to Leonard, " Your work? "

Leonard's laugh came from way down, and it seemed entirely spontaneous. " Lord, no! That's an original Erickson. If I

could turn out a thing like that, I wouldn't be hacking for the trade."

"Oh. Well, it's —pretty. Handsome." Blake shrugged away the inadequacy of his adjectives, and asked Leonard a few more questions—whether his books brought him any royalties, for instance. Leonard pointed out that they weren't the kind that ever hit the bestseller lists, and that the few bucks they had brought were long since gone. To establish the point, Blake asked if he had inherited any money.

Leonard said, "No. No, I live by my work. Want to see some of it?"

They went into the small studio, and Blake looked over the pieces Leonard had on hand. They were quite competent—little plaster-of-Paris animals and figurines—but Leonard was right: his sculpture couldn't touch the Erickson piece in his living-room.

And that seemed to be the end of it. Blake wrote up the story, and, as he went to work on the next victim, should have forgotten Leonard. But something about the set-up had haunted him, and now, three weeks later, the clue had hit him like a cut in salary.

Leonard had said he earned between seventy and a hundred and ten dollars a week, which seemed a probable range for his kind of work. He had no other income; he had no inheritance. Well, Blake earned ninety bucks a week, owed money to anyone who would give him the chance, and lived in two rooms, not five. Blake's furniture couldn't stand comparison with Leonard's; his neighbourhood was far inferior; and he certainly didn't wear the kind of imported tweeds Leonard had had on.

And Blake didn't possess any original Ericksons.

So money was coming from somewhere. Where? Well, maybe it dropped through Leonard's chimney, but Blake didn't think so. He had a hunch.

He telephoned Alf Leonard, who, for once, was at home. When he said, "Hullo?" Blake dropped the receiver into place without answering and hurried over to Leonard's neighbourhood. He moved quickly into the vestibule of the building across the way from number 472, and then he waited.

It was a long afternoon. There was no place to sit and after a couple of hours Blake was feeling the strain.

Finally, in the early dusk, Leonard, carrying a briefcase, left his apartment house. His long legs took him briskly to the corner, where he grabbed a taxi. Blake had no trouble getting one right behind him.

They paraded across town, and twenty minutes later Leonard got out of his taxi and entered a small, beautifully kept private

house. Blake instructed his driver to drive past, got out at the corner, and phoned the paper from a call-box. He gave the copy desk the address of the house and asked them to find out who lived there. Then he stood looking through the glass booth at the house Leonard had entered.

The paper called back soon after. The house belonged to Professor A. J. Rimsen.

Blake walked slowly away, climbed on a bus, and started towards his home. But he found he couldn't sit still, and a few stops after he got off and walked. As he walked he groped for the elusive explanation of what was bothering him.

At first it had seemed reasonable enough that Alphonso Leonard should visit A. J. Rimsen. At first. Then questions started eating into him. Rimsen was the mathematical genius who was called in as a consultant, for reputedly astronomical fees, by industrial and engineering concerns when they hit experimental snags. His knowledge and his practical application of it were said to be invaluable.

So a connection between Rimsen and Leonard seemed likely. Leonard was a mathematical genius, too, wasn't he?

Or was he? He had said, " I outgrew all that." Outgrew what? The knowledge, the ability to apply it, the interest, or the energy? It was an intriguing question. Blake couldn't have said then if he was fascinated by the explanation of what happened to the mind of a man like Leonard, if it was purely a reporter's instinct for a story, or if he had an inkling of the truth. But he was fascinated.

He grew more fascinated the next day.

At ten-thirty the next morning Blake rang the bell of Professor Rimsen's little house. A middle-aged motherly type opened the door. Blake asked if the professor was at home.

" Yes, he is. You have an appointment? "

" No. But I've a letter of introduction."

" I'm afraid—"

" I'm from San Francisco. Some friends of his from Berkeley —near the University—" Blake raised an inquiring eyebrow, and the woman nodded—" asked me to see him."

" But I can't—"

Blake didn't let her finish. Ride it fast was his formula for bluffing an entry. " I've got the letter here." He started a search of his pockets, expecting to be invited in before the abortive search ended.

But the woman said, " I'd suggest you leave the letter. Then the professor can call you and make an appointment."

" But I'll only be here for another twenty-four hours. If you'd just *ask* him—"

" I can't do that."

" I don't think he'd mind in this case—"

" You don't understand," she said uncomfortably. " I mean I *can't*. I can't reach the professor."

" I thought you said he was in? "

She sighed. " It's so difficult . . . If Professor Rimsen expected you he'd come down and let you in or leave a message with me for you. But I have no way of reaching him."

Blake stared at her. " He lives here, doesn't he? "

" Yes. I'm Mrs. Schwartz, his housekeeper." Blake nodded. He didn't feel like letting her fob him off. " When the professor locks that door—" she nodded at an innocuous-looking door on her right—" I can't reach him. He's usually away, you know, and then he leaves it unlocked. But sometimes I find it locked when I didn't even know he'd come back." She added defensively, " He's not peculiar. He's a very nice kind man. He isn't even like a hermit. He sometimes gives keys to friends. But I can't—" She tapered off lamely, " It's his house . . ."

" How does he eat? "

" He comes down, opens the door. Anyway, it isn't always locked. I'm sorry—"

" It's O.K., O.K. Good-bye." She was still murmuring little apologies as Blake walked off.

Blake went to a café, ordered a cup of coffee, and sat staring through the plate glass at the neat little house.

He recalled the photograph of Rimsen he had come across in the morgue files that morning when he was concocting a story that would gain him entry to the house. Rimsen was in the rear of a fuzzy group of scientists taken at a dinner. He looked forty-fiveish, a pleasant-faced man with a Van Dyck. But Blake had just learnt that, pleasant or not, Rimsen was an eccentric. So what? Geniuses usually were. Even, according to the authorities, slightly batty. Did Rimsen's eccentricity have any . . . At that moment another genius presented himself in the doorway of the house Blake was staring at.

Alphonso Leonard, in his distinctive tweeds, emerged looking very uneccentric—gangling, good-looking, and normal. He ambled towards the café, passed it, and rounded the corner.

It was not yet eleven o'clock. Leonard *might* have called on the professor again that morning. But Blake was inclined to think that the two gentlemen had spent the past sixteen hours together, and he was sure they hadn't been playing gin rummy. They had been *working*—he would have made a bet on that, a big bet.

Blake chased out of the café and after Leonard, who was only a street away, still in plain sight. Leonard continued to take it straight and slow for the next hundred yards; then he turned east, and entered another house. This was one of those elegant little town houses with a painted door, and across the front were low wrought-iron palings topped with shining brass knobs. A small brass plaque beside the gate said *James P. Glasser.*

Blake spent the next week finishing up enough features to get ahead of his deadlines. The last three days of the week he called Leonard every couple of hours but got no answer. He decided Leonard was probably " visiting."

Glasser's name had made him sure his hunch was right. Glasser was the man who wrote that popular opera, *Tomorrow's Return.* And if " popular opera " was a contradiction in terms, so was Glasser. He was the phenomenon of Broadway. He wrote *good* music that had the general appeal of a pop recording of *White Christmas.* He had turned out only three things—two operas and an operetta, but they had been smash hits and had netted him a fortune in cash and a reputation rivalling Puccini's.

Blake didn't know much about music, but he *did* know that Glasser made a hell of a lot of money.

Leonard finally answered his phone, and Blake gave a repeat performance: he hung up without saying anything and hot-footed it over to Seventy-third Street.

This time Leonard didn't keep him waiting. He was on his way out as Blake's taxi approached his door. Leonard hailed a taxi at the corner, and away they went in neat procession.

They rode downtown on the West Side to Greenwich Village. As they snaked in and out of the little streets, Blake caught a glimpse of Leonard sitting on the edge of his seat, directing his driver. Blake decided that Leonard had made plenty of trips down to that neighbourhood, that he was again en route to the home of a good friend—a partner?

They finally stopped in front of a large, comfortable-looking block of flats, and by the time Blake followed Leonard into the lobby, the lift was on its way down again. When it got there, Blake tackled the lift-boy.

" Did a tall dark man just go up? "

He looked at Blake blankly. It finally cost a dollar to refresh his memory. The man who had ridden up, the lift-boy said then, had gone into the apartment of Jules Williamson.

On the way back to the office, Blake did a little worrying about his expenses. He had to make up the extras Leonard was costing him, but he had long before established a high degree of padding

in his claims and it would be difficult to raise the total much higher.

It was probably the business of mulling over the expense account and what Leonard was costing him that crystallized the idea that had been slowly forming in his mind. It was a pretty slick idea, but it could be dangerous.

He added Jules Williamson's name to the little roster that was growing in his notebook under the heading, *Alphonso Leonard.* Blake knew who Williamson was without any checking. The general public didn't know anything about him, but newspapermen knew a little. There was no designation for his profession other than "ghost writer" but that wasn't a strong enough term. Williamson was the vellum-bound, gold-tooled edition. His main outlet was politicians. He wrote speeches that tipped the globe—when they came sonorously out of cabinet ministers and Presidential hopefuls. And he didn't restrict himself to speeches. The rumour was that two of the current bestsellers had been ghosted by him.

So there was the roster: Professor A. J. Rimsen, James P. Glasser, and Jules Williamson. They represented a lot of money. Blake was positive that they paid Alphonso Leonard a lot of money. Money was a thing Blake didn't have. It might turn out to be a simple matter to adjust.

Leonard was going to be Blake's short cut. Leonard still had the "energy," as he had called it. He must, Blake decided, have been bursting with it—unable to subdue his drive, his knowledge, his clicking brain. But he had been stung by the side-show aspect of genius, and he had taken an ingenious way out.

He probably did earn around a hundred bucks a week by his sculpture, and probably enjoyed the work. But he must have produced a normal man's weekly output in a couple of hours, as a sort of game, and devoted the rest of his time to serious consultation on music, mathematics, and political works.

The more Blake thought about it, the better the set-up seemed, and the more foolproof. From the logical standpoint it seemed like money in the bank, but, as it turned out, there was an angle he hadn't taken into account.

The next night, a rainy, nasty night, Blake decided to show his hand. Leonard answered his phone, and Blake asked if he could drop in.

Leonard said, "Do."

"Do" isn't what Blake would have called a lengthy speech, and he wouldn't have thought that much expression could be packed into it, but it did seem to him that Leonard sounded less

cordial than he had remembered—in fact, almost ominous. But he decided that that was a lot to read into one word, and shrugged the notion off.

At Seventy-third Street, he walked west from the bus. The Hudson lay ahead of him, and as he peered through the heavy rain, that usually mild river's choppy whitecaps and the lightning-slashed lowering sky above it made it look like the Atlantic in an angry moment. It was a bad night.

Leonard was again waiting at his open door, and for the second time that evening Blake built an impression on nothing. But it seemed to him that the man standing in the doorway looked bigger, brawnier, older than he had on the morning a few weeks earlier when he had smiled a welcome. He wasn't smiling now.

He ushered Blake into the same living-room and installed him in the same chair. He was as courteous as he had been on the first occasion, but more formal—not in the least off-hand. And on this occasion the sun wasn't streaming through the east window, and the heavy curtains drawn over the west windows obscured the view of Jersey.

Leonard didn't slouch in a chair opposite Blake, and he didn't push a coffeecup into his hand. Instead, he stood against a tall bookcase; above him an electric spotlight, partially concealed by the moulding, sent a pool of light on a picture just above Blake's head. Blake wasn't in a strong glare; Leonard wasn't in darkness —but that, somehow, was the effect.

It was all very different from what Blake had expected, and he found it hard to get into his prepared act.

Then Leonard helped him out. "For a reporter, you miss some pretty obvious facts. For instance, when people sit forward behind the driver in a taxi they get the same view through the rear-view mirror as the driver does." He paused.

Lord, he was big. Blake decided that the baggy tweeds and the negligent, loose-limbed way he usually carried himself had made him seem slighter and shorter. And perhaps the lighting in the room was accentuating his breadth. But Blake didn't think so. His voice seemed deeper, too.

He said, "You've been following me."

It was an opening, and Blake plunged. "Well, yes, I have. Sometimes it's part of my job, you know." It seemed to Blake that Leonard was *growing*. He hurriedly decided to condense the rather elaborate build-up he had rehearsed.

"I've got a damn good story, Mr. Leonard. Exposing Mr. Glasser and Professor Rimsen—and, to a lesser degree, Mr. Williamson—is a story in itself. But the human-interest touch, the ability you have retained that enables you to advise and work

with such men—and men in such varied fields—would be of even greater interest to our readers."

"Would be?"

Blake began to wish Leonard would stop feeding him his lines. "Well—"

"You propose to print this story, don't you?"

"Well, I thought . . ."

"Yes? What is it that you thought?"

"I thought you seemed a good sort, and I thought—" Blake stopped. None of the words came out. They sat and stared at each other for a second, and then Blake tore his eyes away. He had just discovered that Leonard had another ability: he was an actor.

Blake didn't know then, and he never did find out, which was the real Leonard—the affable, gangling, charming young man shrinking inside baggy tweeds? Or the threatening, almost sinister giant who, without moving, seemed to be leaning over him? Did he have other guises? If so, Blake never wanted to see them; he never wanted to see the man again at all.

Leonard moved, and as the spell lessened, Blake caught his breath with relief. But the relief didn't last.

Leonard said, "I'll tell you what you thought. You thought you were going to be a rich man. You're a fool. You decided to enter a new profession—blackmail"—it wasn't a word Blake had ever intended to use—"and you didn't even bother to find out the basic tenets of your new art. Blackmail, stupid one, can be brought off by playing on one of only three fears: fear of legal reprisal"—as he ticked a finger, Blake's eyes followed the hand and then went back to Leonard's darkened, magnetic face—"two"—flick!—"fear of public shame, and three, fear of great monetary loss.

"There's a couple of other facts you overlooked. When you decided that my desire for privacy would make me a good subject, you forgot that I am able to pick up and leave at any moment, and always, *anywhere*, earn rather more than a living. I wouldn't have to sit here like a target pinned to a wall and wait for you to come with your popgun and win a prize."

That was reason number four. Blake's eyes—obediently, stupidly, fascinatedly—followed Leonard's hand as he ticked the fourth finger.

"Most of all, you forgot that *I don't want* such a story published, or even mentioned. Didn't you?"

The little flicks of the finger had reached number five. Blake was obsessed by an unreasoning fear that Leonard would go beyond that hand, that he would reach number six. He looked

up and was even more terrified to realize that Leonard knew, had planned and planted that fear. Leonard knew what Blake thought, intended, hoped. He knew—

"Didn't you forget?" The low voice was almost a whisper.

Blake said, "Yes. I forgot. I'm sorry."

"You can go now."

Blake's ridiculous relief at the dismissal didn't evaporate until he had reached home. Not until he was securely inside his two shabby little rooms did anger overcome him. He hadn't been hypnotized; that was a childish idea. No, he had been *acted* out of his plan. He wasn't really a coward, he decided furiously, and he certainly wasn't a fool. Leonard was bigger, much bigger than he, and in a couple of respects Leonard's points were well made.

Blake hadn't thought it through; he hadn't anticipated some of the angles. But if he just crumbled like an old tenement, if he let himself be bluffed, his money was gone. He was back to ninety a week, two small rooms, no car, the expression of tired distaste on the face of the boss. His plans were dead. His life was dead.

Yet even that realization couldn't make him tackle Leonard again. No. But in spite of Leonard, in spite of his "stupid one" —funny, archaic phrase—Blake wasn't a complete fool. There was another way.

This time Blake did think it through. And carefully. Leonard had taught him the "tenets of his new art," and who was Blake to shrug off the lessons of a genius? Fear of public shame; fear of monetary loss. Those two little flicks—the word had made him uncomfortable—applied exactly to Professor Rimsen and Mr. Glasser. Ethically, if not legally, they were dishonest. They were picking another man's brains. Of course, he was willing to be plucked, and he was being paid for it, but just the same they were misrepresenting. And they certainly weren't going to be happy about the threat of exposure. When you do something such as they were doing, Blake thought, you're liable to get caught. So Blake was going to catch them.

Best of all, he would be safe from Leonard. No one could appreciate Leonard's fear of publicity more thoroughly than his partners. They existed as fortunate partners simply because of that fear. In the event of exposure they would lose not only honour and much of their income—they would lose Leonard. Because he would do just what he said: take off for other fields.

Williamson didn't seem worth bothering with. He was entirely unknown to the public. He apparently had no pride of author-

ship. Besides, it would matter little to his clients who turned out their masterpieces.

And Rimsen was hard to get to.

So, for a start, Mr. James P. Glasser. Blake decided to tackle him from the office.

Glasser answered the phone himself. As soon as Blake mentioned his paper Glasser said he'd be delighted to be interviewed. He was very cordial. After all, Blake thought, when you're in the theatrical world, even if you're at the top, publicity does no harm. They made a date for the next afternoon at five o'clock. Glasser said Blake should come for a drink, and the thought went through Blake's mind that Glasser would need a stiff one himself.

But after he had hung up, Blake didn't feel quite so complacent. He sat and stared at the nearest window, twenty feet away—I'm in the darkness, always in the darkness, he thought. Chaotic, unassembled thoughts flashed through his mind. Glasser's voice, that picture of Rimsen with the Van Dyck. Glasser's voice was a rumble. Rimsen's one-way door. Williamson's anonymity. Glasser's voice . . .

He tried to pull himself together. But there was something about their names, too. A. J. Rimsen; Jules Williamson; James P. Glasser. The names weren't really alike; they merely had a vague similarity of cadence. All they literally shared was a " J." That was not an astounding coincidence, and besides, " Alphonso Leonard " had *no* " J " and *no* " son."

But he knew. All of a sudden and without any really conscious piecing-together, he knew. They were all the same man. They were all Leonard.

Blake pulled himself together again. Wait, he told himself, think it through. It's not impossible, and it's certainly not supernatural. The whole thing is simply a masquerade on a grand scale. Leonard is masquerading as four men. Looking at it carefully, he could see that that solution was even more plausible than the idea of Leonard as a ghost backer. Of course, Blake decided, a masquerade. That was it. Of course.

Well, then, what of his plans, his money?

Blake looked round the room—at the distant windows, at the boss's cubby-hole door, at his co-workers—and hated everything he saw. Was he doomed to sit at that desk for as long as he could last, in the literal dimness and the symbolic darkness? The only way to get something was to get something for nothing. This was a creed in which he firmly believed. And he had had that something for nothing almost within his grasp. Was it gone? Was he back in the darkness?

After a half hour's struggle, he came to a decision—a daring but necessary decision: he would go through with the plan. He would pretend that he still saw the four men as separate entities. He would blackmail James P. Glasser. Leonard had lied to the extent of a half-truth when he said that he could always pack up and go somewhere else to ply his many professions. Blake saw now that while Leonard certainly *could* go, he *wouldn't*. Too many years, too much planning had gone into his four identities. He wouldn't want to desert them.

If Blake played it straight it would be worth Leonard's while to make at least one payment to protect those identities. And Blake himself would be somewhat protected from Leonard's awful wrath by his pretence of dealing with Glasser. Leonard would not be able to admit to the ruse that—that upset Blake so much. Perhaps, if he could make the pay-off stiff enough, he would never have to go back, never have to face Leonard again . . .

He pushed the thought aside, and set to work. He used the rest of the day and part of the next to write up his story. There was going to be nothing haphazard about his presentation this time. He was merely a reporter offering Glasser an opportunity to defend himself before Blake submitted the story of his duplicity to his editor. The offer of money would come from " Glasser." And any man in his position would make the offer.

It was still a workable plan.

When Blake opened the little iron gate in the greying light of early dusk, he was completely prepared for any eventuality. His nerves were under control, and he felt resourceful and firm-willed.

" Glasser " opened the door himself. He turned out to be a stooped, bespectacled, greying man. It was so convincing a job of make-up and acting that Blake was a little disconcerted. After rumbling a few pleasant words, Glasser led him through several connecting rooms towards the rear of the house.

Blake had trouble keeping his eyes on the stooped back ahead of him because of the incredible, the unique wealth of the surroundings. Everything was old—the best the centuries had to offer. The antique Russian rugs, the paintings hanging on every inch of wall spelt more money than Blake had ever seen gathered in one place before. Mentally, he raised his price, but he lost another fraction of his self-possession.

When they reached a rear study, his host installed Blake in a tapestry chair which it seemed sinful to sit on.

It was a low-ceilinged, darkish room, lit only by the light of a single barred window in the off-centre of the rear wall. The window looked out on a cheerless, cement-paved court. The room was packed; one could hardly call it cluttered since every

one of its hundreds of objects was distinctive—odd, beautiful, expensive. But—packed or cluttered—the room gave Blake a breathless, smothered feeling.

Glasser had moved across to a silver tray on which crystal glasses were waiting. He said, "You like my house?" His back was towards Blake, but something—power? personality?—radiated from him.

Blake made an effort, and although even to his own ears he sounded a little stifled, he managed to bring out a few polite words: "I certainly do. I've never seen such a collection of antiques. They're beyond me, of course. I can't estimate their—their importance."

The man turned from the tray. He had two drinks in his hands as he approached Blake. He said, "You mean their value, don't you, sir?"

He hadn't turned on the lights yet, and it was getting darker in the room. He seemed to be moving very slowly, and as he moved he was straightening up, getting taller. It came to Blake that Leonard was throwing away the disguise, and the smothered feeling grew on him. He had thought he was prepared for every eventuality, but, after all, he wasn't.

He wasn't prepared for this one. It was mad of Leonard to expose his hand like this. How could Blake have anticipated a stupid move on the part of a genius? How could Blake handle it? His every breath seemed harder to draw. It was dark in the low-ceilinged room, and airless.

The man came over, put the drinks down on a little table and raised one of his hands to his face. He removed his glasses. For a minute, Blake clearly saw three men—the figure before him looked like the picture of Professor Rimsen, with the deepening shadows supplying the effect of a Van Dyck. Glasser's grey hair and bulk were still there.

But the size and the terrible power of Alphonso Leonard was taking over, taking over . . .

Blake said, and heard the ridiculous squeak that was suddenly his voice, "Why are you telling me this? Showing me this? I had no intention of exposing your masquerade! It's insane to—to—" He stopped.

Insane? What had his research on genius taught him? Certainly not that geniuses were insane. But there had been the constant suggestion that when mental ability reached too great a development, sanity might be left behind.

Leonard said, "Masquerade?" His voice was low, but it echoed and swept back from all sides of the tight, suffocating room. "Masquerade! If this were but a masquerade I should

let you go. What would it matter to me if the world saw a masquerade? But the truth—that's different. I am not yet ready to let the world know of the power of split man, of the multiplied, diffused personality. *I am four men*, stupid one! "

He brought his hand down, the glasses dangling, and he extended the thumb of the other hand.

" Stupid one "—his voice was the merest whisper—" I warned you not to make the sixth mistake! "

The shadow of his outstretched hand grew huge—filled the entire room—and Blake's last vision was of the gigantic thumb turned down above him.

★ ★ ★

CO-RESPONDENCE COURSE

Eminent counsel cross-examining the co-respondent:

" You have been very friendly with the respondent for many years? "

" Yes."

" You both frequently went to dinners and dances together? "

" That is so."

" You have taken many motor-car trips together without the knowledge of the petitioner, the husband? "

" Quite right."

" You spent week-ends in Brighton together? "

" I agree."

" Come; let me put it to you bluntly—have you ever slept with the lady? "

" No, sir; NOT A WINK."

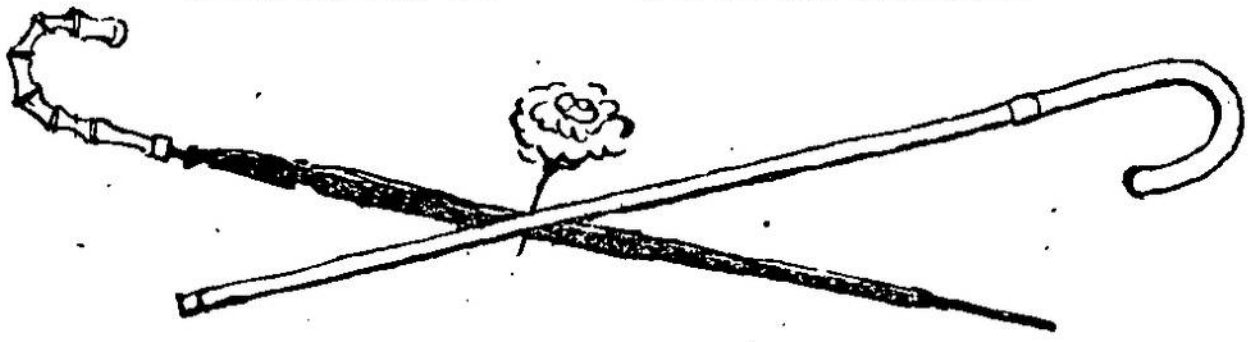
HIS HONOUR JUDGE TUDOR REES,
Reserved Judgment

SOLUTION to ABOUT FACE!

on page 16

1. *Helen of Troy*
2. *Robert Jenkins, whose ear was produced as evidence of Spanish atrocities in Havana and led to war with Spain in* 1739.
3. *Cleopatra;*
   Pascal, the French philosopher
4. *a. one;*
   b. a hundred
5. *Tycho Brahe, the Danish astronomer, who lost his own in a duel; Brasenose College, Oxford*
6. *Oliver Cromwell*
7. *You would be turned to stone.*

BEAU IDEAL



This sort of adoration of the real . . .

LORD BYRON

Hard to Get

" The ideal male model," an agent told us, " has no camera nerves, is twenty-five to thirty-five, five foot eleven, with a thirty-eight-inch chest, good physique, pleasant looks, and angelic temper.

" This type," he added, " is elusive."

from Woman, April 21, 1956

Demand and Supply

And when a maiden says, " I think,
I'll let him buy the ring,"
She ought to ask herself, I think,
" Now, is he quite the thing? "
For model men and fair, I think,
Are very, very rare, I think,
Yet we may here and there, I think,
Supply a long-felt want.

GEORGE DANCE, *The Nautch Girl*

Mystic Bond

Who are they? . . . They are looking skyward and turning up the collar of a faultlessly cut overcoat: " For Men of Discrimination, This Winter, the New Middleweight Raglan." Sometimes there are two or three of them together (if three, one belongs to a younger age-group). They have glasses in their hands, and grave, judicious expressions on their faces. " The People who Count," says the caption, " Drink Old Spud, the whisky with Stamina."

Yes, but who *are* these Men of Discrimination, these People who Count?

from The Times, January 20, 1956

CHATEAU GUMDROP

Opportunity came, up to the door in a Rolls-Royce

BY H. A. MANHOOD

PHIPPS, Ffennell & Felps were prepared to build anything anywhere.

They used to say it with bouncy, empire-building confidence which suggested experience with skyscrapers and a Taj Mahal or two. Actually, they were specialists in ingle-nooks, dormer-windows, and triangular closets which were always tested by the bulkiest partner to make sure action and escape were possible.

Phipps was the bulky one, big as a fatted calf, built to last like everything they did, as he'd assure you most genially even if you'd come to complain about warped doors or crumbling cement.

Ffennell was grasshopper-thin, bow-tied, and clinging, a qualified architect with romantic ideas, tut-tuttingly ambitious. Felps was small, rough-cut, and worried-looking like a ventriloquist's dummy. He'd been a haulage contractor, owned gravel and sandpits by the dozen and spent much time shooting at the wild life in them in a resentful kind of way.

I knew Phipps long before the partnership. He was a fair rough-builder and carpenter. He was shrewd and had picked it up as he went along. But, at that time, he hadn't picked up quite enough.

I wanted a well dug. Ah yes, he knew all about wells. Just sixteen feet deep because the divining-rod showed plenty of water round about fourteen. He was amused, but started work right away, himself and a red-haired boy who whistled piercingly all the time. It was clay soil with pockets of flint. At five feet, the hole began to get out of hand. Phipps said not to worry; it would all come right at the bricking-up. He fixed up a shaky pulley-beam, filling buckets like a machine, the boy hauling up, emptying into a barrow, wheeling the clay well away.

At ten feet the hole was a most peculiar shape: at sixteen it was horrible to look at, an upside-down, warty carrot shape. No sign of water, fortunately for Phipps.

Bricking-up began, rather frantically, the boy feeding bricks, Phipps fumbling about like a trapped rat, trying to fit them neatly together. The boy stopped whistling after Phipps clumped him. They cemented the top ten courses and Phipps eyed me triumphantly. Where shall we dig the next one?

I said no need. The water would break through. I'd heard it bubbling and hissing away behind the nightmarish brickwork. Phipps didn't believe me.

I said if he'd shove a rod between the bricks at that damp patch it would help the coming. He did just that, pulled the rod out, waited, then grinned rudely up at me.

Nicely high-pressured, the jet of water hit him in the ear. He bellowed, groped for the tools lying on the bottom, panicked, and came pounding up the ladder, very wet and swearing hard. The boy squealed with laughter—that is, until Phipps clumped him again. From then on Phipps declared himself an expert on well-boring. He added the cost of the drowned tools to his bill and I counter-claimed for the use of my ladder and wheelbarrow. Placatingly he produced a weather-vane he'd made.

A gift, he said. It weighed a hundredweight, was in the shape of a monstrous fowl, and was so badly balanced that it would need a hurricane to make it spin. I hadn't a chimney strong enough even if I'd wanted it. He wasn't offended at refusal, only said he'd make me a light-weight one and to bear him in mind.

He became too grand soon after that for me to bear him anywhere. He met Ffennell and Felps at a council meeting, saw what good cards they could hold together, and they became partners. They kindly relieved the council of responsibility for a windmill, adapting it as an office of works, painting their names on the still-serviceable sails on the principle that everyone looks at windmills and would remember the firm when building was required.

Quite a lot did remember, some with regret. The firm prospered. They did conversions and built old-world houses complete with sun-dials, weathercocks, pixie dells, fake well-tops and, of course, ingle-nooks everywhere.

Of the three, Ffennell was the most ambitious. He entered competitions, attended conferences. He wanted to build something remarkable. At last, after a few profitable but pettifogging years, opportunity came, right up to the door, in a Rolls-Royce. A big, faded cabbage-rose of a woman broom-sticked round the mill before entering the office. Ffennell was waiting, poised over exotic plans.

She introduced herself as Dame Isobel.

"You have heard of me?"

Ffennell had. He thought she was a damned bad actress, but a good business woman to get away with it.

"I want to live somewhere within the county. I want you to build me a darling château. There is some pink stone quarried somewhere in Somerset. I want it built of that. Pink is my colour. I want it built overhanging water, with beautiful arches like Chenonceaux. I sometimes see myself as Diane de Poitiers. Do you see me like that?"

Ffennell would have seen her as anything to gain approval, especially when she added that expense was the last thing to consider. She wanted something built that would be a lovely, everlasting memorial to her beauty and genius. Find some lakes for her inspection and then some plans and if a trip to the Loire would help the planning they'd make it together, in the Rolls.

Ffennell was willing, feeling a little raped already but so grateful for the grand opportunity. Phipps thought it was a hoax until they banked a retaining cheque for five thousand. They were to drop all other work at once, concentrate on the château. Felps wondered casually whether they could sell the old kite one of his disused gravel pits; there were several with five-acre lakes, cliffs, and pretty beaches. That is exactly what they did. They bulldozed a gravel pit into acceptable shape, diverted a stream to freshen the lake, stocked it with trout, and planted cypresses.

Ffennell went to Chenonceaux with Isobel—he never spoke about the trip but he suffered from nightmares for years afterwards—and prepared monumental plans. They'd have to use a lot of concrete where it wouldn't show, and there wouldn't be time for carved stone or panelling. Soon there were dozens of subcontractors at work with high-powered equipment, pink stone piled up—the quarry was near bankrupt and had great quantities available—and flood-lighting kept the work going at night.

Isobel was delighted. She ordered half a dozen gondolas for the lake and a gross of Ali-Baba-size urns, sent lorryloads of mouldy tapestry and stagey furniture down and enough oil paintings to start a gallery. Cheques for work to date were met promptly. The partners moved in a heaven of their own until completion was in sight. Then sirens blew and heaven collapsed.

The pinkness weathered out of the stone.

Ffennell had a breakdown. Isobel wept and said the place was useless to her unless it was pink, her colour. No good telling her she'd chosen the stone herself.

Phipps suggested spraying. This was done but whereas the original pink had been cherubic, the new colour was gumdrop-bright and hideous. Isobel said she was finished, she'd write it off against expenses but, since she wanted somewhere to live

immediately, she'd take over the windmill and they could take over the château. Thankful that she'd not thought of suing them for not knowing the stone would fade—everyone else in the trade knew—the partners got out quickly, setting up office in Château Gumdrop, as Felps named it sardonically.

For a time people drove in, thinking it was a new holiday camp, but no one came with plans to build or even for alterations.

Ffennell sat like a webbed fly, Phipps played skittles by himself in the long gallery and Felps fished from the balconies overhanging the lake. They were desperate men, near to breaking. But Isobel broke first, her neck too, decisively.

Her weight was too much for the little gallery outside the cap of the mill—she used to do a Juliet to herself up there—and she fell with a screaming noise as of a train emerging from a tunnel.

Almost before the funeral flowers had withered, the partners had bought the mill back and were again in business. But the experience had aged them terribly and they would undertake only straightforward repairs and the building of bungalows from then on. Only Felps made any effort to sell the château. He looked up coal-merchant friends from his haulage-contracting days, found them prosperous and influential, and, although there wasn't a coal-mine within a hundred miles, he sold the château as a rest home for weary miners.

They had a nation-wide competition to find a name and settled for Little Venice, perhaps because of the gondolas and the old fruit jars. Now the place is full of billiard tables, dart boards, television sets, and beer stains, but the main attraction is fishing from the balconies and out of bedroom windows. One man actually caught a five-pound trout while lying in bed. Heaven itself can offer no more than this and it is hoped in high circles that recruitment in the industry will benefit substantially with such inducement available.

Sometimes I see Phipps and ask about my promised weathercock. But he's lost his sense of humour. He complained to my neighbour once, " That man needs a weathercock about as much as I need fuller's earth." So I don't think I shall ever get it.

The one that he offered me originally, by the way, sits on one of the turrets of Little Venice, immovable as ever. Not that that matters, for no one really cares which way the wind blows.

★ ★ ★

HELL FOR LEATHER

Men still die with their boots on, but usually one boot is on the accelerator.

A GIFT IN SEASON

Great were the Mullah's expectations

BY CHRISTOPHER LANDON

THE Mullah Kwaja Nasr-el-Din had spent a full hour in the shop of his parishioner, Reza the Coppersmith, turning over the stock of pots and pans with all the sharp-eyed cunning of an eager old crone.

It was not that he had the slightest desire to buy; nor that the dark cave of the shop, facing onto the Maidan—the town square—of Khorrabad, was cool and unplagued by the flies of the fierce Persian summer afternoon. But it was the season of gifts, and if he stayed there long enough, made himself prominent enough, then Reza might remember . . . might let go one small thing from his vast stock as a present for his guide, philosopher, and friend.

But Reza did not seem to want to remember, even though he was aware of the Mullah's presence. He made it very obvious that he was, coming, between turns at serving other customers, to stare silently—and the Mullah thought rather offensively—at the continued turning-over of his wares. At the fourth approach he spoke.

"You are wearing out the floor of my shop, Holy One. What is it that you wish to buy?"

"Nothing," said the Mullah. "Alas, there is nothing here that is equal to my small purse. Times are bad . . . and I am in need, great need, of a new dige to boil my rice. But no one remembers . . ."

"Diges . . ." said Reza, waving his hand towards the rows of copper cauldrons, half spheres that were ready to hang over the fire by their three chains and boil the rice for the pilaw. "There are a hundred diges here, at all prices from ten tomans to fifty."

"But I cannot even afford ten." Then hopefully, "As you know, it is the time of the giving of presents."

"Presents?" Reza spat. "And why should I give *you* a present—father of a thousand lies?"

"You come and stuff your belly at my house weekly. You, and the Cobbler, and that rascal the Tailor. You eat so much I am forced to starve for the next five days. You come and wake me from my afternoon sleep to explain the true meaning of passages

in the Book. And that day when the sun grew dark of a sudden, and you came crying that the end of the world was at hand, did I not calm you by explaining the nature of an eclipse . . . that it would pass in a few moments?"

Reza fingered his chin. "Expounding the book is your duty. When you come to my house, the food is such that you win back threefold all that I take from you. But in the matter of the moon passing in front of the sun . . . yes, I must admit you did me a service. You stopped me confessing . . . talking of things that I would not like heard."

"Then I am remembered?" said the Mullah, happily.

"Yes. A present—a fine present!"

The Coppersmith strode out to a shelf at the front of the booth, where the cheapest goods were on display, the lesser temptation, the less loss if snatched by a thief from the street. He rummaged furiously; then came back with a small battered object. "A valuable chafing-dish," he said, holding it out. "Your present —and gag—for the next twelve moons."

He turned away quickly, bowing low to a rich merchant who had just entered the shop.

The Mullah looked at his present, and it was dirty and dented. Perhaps, if he put it down quickly, and picked up something else more to his liking, and left before Reza had finished with this customer, then it might not be noticed. He moved stealthily towards the gloom at the back of the shop.

The door of the workshop was there . . . open. As he peered in, his eyes fastened at once on a great glow of colour. On the bench, a dige, the finest he had ever seen: one that made his mouth water.

The burnished copper glowed in the half-light like blood: the smooth roundness of it was like a woman's breast: in it one could cook rice fit for the Shah. It was the dige of all diges. The moment he saw it, the Mullah knew it must be his own, whatever the cost. But it was too big for his planned substitution.

He crept back to Reza, still clutching his chafing-dish, and Reza turned impatiently from his last deep salaam to the departing merchant.

"Are you still here?" he snapped.

"Yes. I did not have time to thank you properly for this fine present. I suppose it must be very valuable?"

The Coppersmith, having just sold a pair of candlesticks at a good price, was feeling expansive. "Indeed. Fifteen—even twenty tomans. Who can say? But price does not matter when it is a gift."

"Twenty tomans," said the Mullah dreamily. "Then, if I

give it back to you, and add another ten tomans from my own purse, I can have a dige?"

Reza was caught, and knew it. "I suppose so. Up to there—" He made a mark on the shelf of cauldrons. "But not beyond. They are too expensive."

"I do not want any in your shop, friend. I want the one in the workshop."

"Are you crazy? That big dige . . . the finest in all the town?"

"Fifteen tomans extra, then."

"No. It is not for sale."

"Twenty, perhaps . . . ?"

"No! It is my own property. I only have it here for repairs to one of the chains."

"Peace be on you," muttered the Mullah, and fled from the shop still clutching the chafing-dish against his robe.

For nights he lay awake, tossing on his couch, thinking of that dige, determined that somehow he would get it. Always, his thoughts drifted towards the character of his friend: ignorant, greedy, superstitious. The winning might take a long time.

He made no immediate move—except to go out of his way to praise the cooking of the Coppersmith's rice on the next three occasions he was asked to dine. Then, one day, he rushed into the shop, bearing a cheese that had been given him by the parent of a boy he alleged he had cured of warts. "A present for you, O most illustrious of Coppersmiths."

Reza sniffed the cheese with suspicion. "And what do you want in return?"

"Want? I want nothing in kind. Only to beg a small favour."

"Which is?"

"The loan of your famous dige. I have an important guest. A holy Imam who has come from Meshed to visit me. He must have the best . . . only such rice as can be cooked in a dige like yours."

"Loan?" sneered Reza. "I know your loans."

"Only for three days. I swear it on the book. And if you think I might substitute an inferior, put your mark on it where all can see." With many grumbles, it was agreed: the mark was stamped on in the presence of two witnesses.

To Reza's surprise, it was returned on the day promised. After his voluble thanks, the Mullah, looking carefully over his shoulder to see that they were alone, said in a hushed voice, "Tell me, does she speak to you too?"

"She? Speak? What are you talking about?"

The Mullah dropped his voice a shade lower. "Do not mention this to a soul, but your dige is miraculous. She talks."

Reza's laughter was only stilled by the other's earnest manner. "It is true, I tell you! Twice when I have been alone in the kitchen, waiting for the rice to boil, a voice has come out of the inside, a woman's voice, saying she was in pain. Listen carefully, and you will hear it for yourself."

The Coppersmith took his pot home and spent many hours in his kitchen waiting, but no sound came from the dige; his scoffing at the Mullah only produced the reply that it *had* happened. It could be that the air was different in the Mullah's house, which was higher up the hill; maybe it was caused by the odour of sanctity that clung to the house like a garment. If Reza would lend him the pot again, he would prove it.

But the demonstration never took place. Within two days the Mullah was back again, a look of awe on his face, carrying the dige, wrapped in a fine white cloth, gingerly in front of him.

"Ssssh!" A finger darted to his lips to check the Coppersmith's startled exclamation. "Do not disturb her. She is still weak."

"You and your *she*. What wonder has happened now?"

"The greatest of all," the Mullah said in a hushed voice. "A miracle. Look for yourself." He lifted the edge of the cloth and pointed down into the belly of the cauldron.

Reza peered, and at the bottom of the dark space, resting in the exact centre, was another small copper pot. No mention was made by the Mullah that it was one of a set he had bought, dirt-cheap in a neighbouring village. Reza looked up, puzzled.

"The greatest wonder of all," repeated the Mullah, rolling his eyes. "The dige has had a baby."

Greed was the Coppersmith's first reaction. His hand shot down and scooped up the offspring. "It is my property, of course."

"Of course. Just as the foal is the property of the master of the beast. That is why I have returned it. I am an honest man."

"Do you think she will do it again?" asked Reza cautiously as he fondled his new possession.

"Who knows?" said the Mullah gravely. "Who knows the ways of God, or the breeding time of pots? But I will tell you one thing, friend. I do not think it is likely to happen under your roof. After all, she did not even speak there."

"You keep my dige—?"

"Only for one purpose, and of course, all the progeny are yours."

"Yes, but—"

"And another thing . . ." The Mullah rammed home his final advantage. "It is well that we spoke of this to no one. Otherwise

all my other friends would be bringing *their* diges . . . and soon your shop would be out of business."

The Coppersmith could do nothing but agree, and the Mullah took the cauldron home.

Now he would be able to enjoy its excellence at a very small cost. Perhaps he could stretch out the pots he had laid by for the purpose for a year or more: perhaps in time, Reza even might forget. He looked forward with anticipation to an endless succession of fine pilaw. But before he had even got round to the production of the third baby in nine months, the cruel, unexpected blow fell.

There was a surprise visit of the Magistrate, who doubled as tax-collector, to the town of Khorrabad; and one of the chief objects of this visit was a long and painful interview with the Mullah, on matters fiscal and spiritual. It ended in a terrified invitation from the Mullah for the big man to come and dine with him that evening.

Great were the preparations: great the Mullah's expectations when at last the Magistrate wiped his mouth and leaned back from the *coursi*.

"Good," he said. "Never had better rice. How do you do it?"

"Not a question of the quality of the rice, Excellency. Nor the length of washing, nor the time of cooking. It is a question of the dige. And mine has been in the possession of my family for over a hundred years."

"Let me see it."

There was nothing that the Mullah could do except call his servant and order it to be cleaned.

"Wonderful," said the Magistrate. "Wonderful." He ran his hand over the smooth brightness of it. "It is a pity you will not be able to enjoy it much longer, friend. That matter of the widow might—I say *might*—need investigation in Teheran. And you know what that would mean . . ."

The Mullah thought about his unpaid taxes; also of the widow. The bastinado . . . the pain on his bare feet. "Is there anything . . . Highest?" His voice was almost a squeak.

"No, I do not think so. Except that this pot—" he passed his hand once more over the smooth red sphere—"that this would be of more advantage in a house of influence . . . in Teheran. On loan, as you might say, where a good word could be passed on at the right time . . . for the Holy Man of Khorrabad."

"And all would be forgotten, even the widow?" The Mullah almost breathed it.

"But of course."

He sighed, and wondered how to deal with the Coppersmith; but heavier guns were trained on him at the moment. "It is yours, Excellency. Tell your chief bearer to take it away."

Peace came to the town after the departure of the Magistrate: but not peace to the Mullah. Excuses may be cunning, but they will not satisfy a greedy man for ever. At the end of three months, the Coppersmith was demanding calves . . . or, at least, to see the cow. Something had to be done, and Mullah Kwaja Nasr-el-Din did it quickly.

One morning he heard a battering on his front door, then from the courtyard of his house, the angry voice of the Coppersmith demanding admittance from his servant. Silently, he fled to the kitchen.

"Where is my pot—?" Reza had outraged all the strict rules of etiquette and burst straight in upon him.

"Silence." The Mullah was squatting on the floor in an attitude of deepest dejection. "We are in the presence of death, friend."

"Death—?"

"Alas, yes." He pointed at a pile of ashes on the hearth. "I have to tell you that the dige is dead."

"Dead—? Thief! Robber! Pots do not die." He had the Mullah by the throat now, nearly strangling him.

"Gently, Reza. Let go and I will tell you all." When the Mullah had broken free, he rearranged his robe and looked at his friend thoughtfully. "It is written," he said, "that man is born, and man dies. You believe that?"

Reza, breathing hard, nodded slowly.

"And you believed that your miraculous pot had young, and you took them gratefully?"

Again Reza nodded.

"Then both are equal. Both man and pot are born . . . both, in God's good time, must die. You cannot have it otherwise."

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SOLUTION to ARGOSY CROSSWORD on page 144

Across. 1, *Madder.* 4, *Plumbago.* 8, *Moorcock.* 10, *Scruff.* 12, *Colts.* 13, *Ethiopian.* 14, *Yield.* 16, *Nurseries.* 17, *Reason why.* 19, *Tamar.* 21, *Great Bear.* 22, *Ideal.* 24, *Millet.* 25, *Celerity.* 26, *Nodosity.* 27, *Seated.*

Down. 1, *Mimicry.* 2, *Droll.* 3, *Encased.* 5, *Microbe.* 6, *Aluminium.* 7, *Offends.* 9, *Clean sweep.* 11, *Cherry tree.* 15, *Enamelled.* 17, *Regimen.* 18, *Ostlers.* 19, *Trireme.* 20, *Relayed.* 23, *Evict.*

NO WARNING

" I have come," he said
" to see Sergeant Dark "

BY MARK DERBY

KITTY DARK woke from her siesta with a chill foreboding. Almost as if she'd heard a warning whisper that the worst hour of her life had already begun. But there was only the sudden realization that she'd forgotten all about Pat's supper.

She sighed. She forgot so often. She'd even forgotten to jot a reminder on the new memo slate Pat had brought home yesterday and hung with a grin under the kitchen fan.

Things I Mustn't Forget, it was headed in scarlet. But what if you forgot to use it . . .?

Or were there enough sausages left for tonight? In her honey silk pyjamas she hurried to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. There was the ham she'd bought this morning for supper . . . and forgotten. She turned a wry glance up at the new memo slate and then blinked as she saw, under the red *Things I Mustn't Forget*, a single scrawled line. *I love you—Pat.*

Her blue eyes shone. Things she mustn't forget—he must have written it as he left by the backdoor after lunch. Oh Pat . . .

Two months after her wedding and six weeks after flying out to Malaya she still had a few unworn trousseau clothes. After a shower she put on the sunflower-yellow pleated playdress and brushed her gold hair with one hand as she raised sunblinds on the shady side of the verandah with the other.

Then she saw the man coming up the verandah steps.

Chinese. Young. Slim in a dazzling white shirt and lavender slacks. Pale. Good-looking.

Without uneasiness she put down her hairbrush and opened the door. This was one of two isolated bungalows and the people next door were out. But already she was losing her initial wariness of oblique eyes and brown skins, aware that it dated from the time when she'd first known Pat. He hadn't been a Kuala Lumpur health official then, but still a soldier in the jungle war against communist terrorists and she'd had nightmares of cruel Asian faces watching from jungle ambushes to take Pat away from her.

And, anyway, there was something appealing about this young Chinese. He didn't smile. His face was strained and dreamy, like someone waking from a nightmare. He asked, " Mrs. Patrick Dark? "

It happened in a second. She had taken a step back into the sitting-room, and he had moved forward inside, closing the door behind him. He said, " My name is Tan Lee Yong."

Despite her panic pulsebeat, she said evenly, " You've come to see my husband, I expect. He'll be home in under ten minutes."

" Yes, I have come to see Sergeant Dark." His oddly disturbing voice and his excellent English set her memory chasing clues. " He must have been expecting me."

It was five years since Pat had been a sergeant, so the clues led a long way back. Tan Lee Yong . . .

Suddenly her memory clicked and a headline flashed before her mind's eye: *Sergeant Dark, I am Going to Kill You!*

A Merchant Navy officer who hadn't realized how much Pat already meant to her in those early days had sent her the clipping from a Singapore newspaper:

DEATH THREAT

After a five-year sentence had been passed on him in Kuala Lumpur yesterday, Tan Lee Yong, 20, the most brilliant of the interpreters attached to the security forces, uttered a dramatic threat from the dock.

Pointing to Sergeant Patrick Dark, chief prosecution witness and leader of the patrol that ambushed him, he shouted, " Sergeant Dark, I am going to kill you! "

On January 8, Sergeant Dark, to whose platoon the prisoner was attached, led a night patrol, following certain information, to a jungle *basha* four miles from Sekong. They surprised a secret rendezvous between the prisoner and Chua Ah Loy, a beautiful and notorious member of the Tiger Ming platoon which has terrorized the area for two years. When they were called on to surrender, the woman opened fire, fatally wounding Corporal Tim Gray. She was killed a few moments later . . .

Kitty remembered it and shivered.

Looking into the slanting eyes that were the colour of black coffee, She began to feel afraid. This man had come to pick a fight with her husband and he had been planning it for five grim, shut-in years.

She said, " It won't do any good to see my husband. I know who you are now, but all that was long ago. It's past and done with."

His face twisted painfully. " I should have forgotten in five years—is that what you are saying? "

" You should have tried to forget," she insisted.

He said bitterly, " So the Sergeant told you about me. What did he say, I wonder."

She remembered. " He said you were all right but—you fell in love with the wrong girl."

" At least he admitted that I . . . cared about her, then. And he knew she cared about me, though at the trial he claimed that, after she joined the terrorists, she only went on meeting me to worm security information out of me."

" I don't believe that," she said spiritedly. " If Pat said that in the witness-box, then he believed it was true."

" After I'd sworn to him that we'd both tried to stop loving each other, and failed? It must have been plain enough that night, anyway."

Pity stabbed her as she recalled Pat's story of the boy's crazy grief, his refusal to believe that the girl hadn't been equally mad about him. She'd asked him questions about security, he admitted that, but he swore she'd asked them under duress from her gang bosses, swore he'd never answered one, and declared she had loved him faithfully.

Kitty thought of Pat, who must have left his office by now. " What else could he have done? " she argued. " He only did his duty."

" Yes, he only did his duty," the dreaming voice echoed. " As I have to do mine now."

She said, " In war good men have to do bad things. Loyalty requires that."

His sombre eyes met hers and he said, " Exactly. Loyalty requires it. Perhaps you do understand after all, Mrs. Dark."

And she saw the gun in his hand.

First she had a moment of cool courage. " Don't be a fool," she heard herself say. " Put that away and go, and I'll forget everything you've said. You must be mad—"

Fear came back then and stopped her, because she saw the unsteadiness of his eyes and she knew how little time remained and how little chance there was. In a changed, aching voice she said, " Please go away. You're frightening me."

He avoided her eyes, crouching in his crazy loneliness, his self submerged under five years' brooding on revenge. But formidable. Any fool with a gun could kill Pat as he came through the front door; she was the only one who could prevent it, and she had only two or three minutes.

The gilt wedding-present clock ticked on uncaringly. The

thick, still air was like a gag. She folded her hands in the lap of her pleated yellow skirt to control their trembling and said, "You're still in prison, aren't you? You're not free yet?"

The sombre eyes were far away. "This will bring me freedom," he said, turning over the black automatic in his hand.

She fought for calm. A great black bee buzzed lazily through the window, but shot off suddenly as if it smelt death in the room. Pat would be somewhere outside the town now, homeward bound, driving alone in his little blue car along the Batu Arang road. Desperately, she played for time. "My husband discovered a secret of yours and you had to pay the penalty. Now you see him as your enemy and you've planned a crazy revenge. Because of him you suffered, so now he must pay the penalty. That's the way you see it, isn't it?"

"That's the way it is," he said, his mouth gone hard.

"No!" She leaned forward eagerly. "No! If something happens to Pat I shall be the one to pay the penalty. Do you want to do that to *me*?"

He backed under her steady gaze. "I'm sorry about you. Don't you believe that?"

Any minute now the little blue car would turn off the main road for the last three hundred yards up to the bungalow. "You don't understand," she said patiently. "It isn't as if Pat had tried to kill you. Because it was his duty he killed someone who was—all the world to you."

When he said nothing to that she made it plainer. "Don't you see? *I'm* all the world to Pat . . ."

The dark threatening stare deepened with his plunge into understanding. He hadn't been so near to anybody as this, she realized suddenly, for five years. For five dark years he'd probably never once spoken to a woman.

She went on deliberately. "If Pat comes back in two minutes and finds me dead and you gone, that will be the revenge you want. That way he'll suffer as you suffered." Yes, Pat would suffer: without her he would live alone in hell for a while, but he would live. All suffering had an end, and she would have saved his life with her love.

Glimpsing the sudden flash of blue between the trees, she whispered, "Good-bye, darling, good-bye," and dropped her hands to her sides like a prisoner facing a firing-squad. "This way," she said.

The deep stare held her eyes while slowly he shook his head. The hand holding the automatic stayed limp.

"Yes, yes," she pleaded, breathlessly. It was seconds, not minutes any more. "It's your one way to get even. Now."

But he only said, like a man listening to his own voice without quite understanding, " Why should I hurt you? I can't hurt you."

Out of the black pool of shade under the rain trees the little blue car shot sparkling into the sun-glare. She had failed.

In a despairing fury she threw herself on him, clawing at the gun, knowing she hadn't a chance. They struggled while the car swept below the verandah and into the garage beyond. As Lee Yong tore free of her she glimpsed the memo slate on the kitchen wall with Pat's *I love you* scrawled across it. His last words . . .

A violent thrust sent her spinning against the wall. Through a dark mist of shock she saw Lee Yong jump backwards into the kitchen, his gun covering the front door. Her scream was no louder than a breathless moan. Struggling to her feet, she rushed into Pat's arms in the verandah doorway, holding her body between him and the gun, trying hysterically to warn him.

And then, surfacing from a momentary dip into unconsciousness, she found Pat still with her, lifting her onto the rattan sofa, exclaiming, " Darling, what's all this? "

Her incoherent answer sent him striding into the kitchen, but there was no shock of a shot as she sprang up to follow him. She found him alone in there, a black automatic in his hand, staring up at the new memo slate.

There was the heading, *Things I Mustn't Forget*, and Pat's *I Love You*. Then three new lines scrawled underneath: *And don't you ever forget it, Sergeant Dark. She saved your skin today.*

She read the words twice and then her eyes filled with tears for someone who had refused to hurt her, to be her enemy, someone she had saved today as surely as she had saved Pat.

Safe in Pat's strong arms, she began to explain.

H. E. BATES

THAT July morning when we lay in the corn-loft where the martins were nesting it was so hot and quiet that every breath of chaff-dust falling through the floor cracks looked like a puff of smoke as it drifted to the stable below. There were the three of us, myself, Janey, and Biff, the boy from the butcher's, lying as still as death on the floorboards, and, staring through them into the stable, we could see a man knotting a rope with his hands.

"He's making a lasso," Janey whispered.

"That's not a lasso," I said. "It's a halter. It's like my grandfather goes to fetch the horse with."

"No. It's a lasso," she whispered. "I know it's a lasso."

Biff, the only one who didn't speak because he had enough to do with the martin's eggs in his cap, always wore the same big brown cap, with a proper peak, like a man's, and it was just right for putting eggs in. He couldn't see much either because he hadn't got his glasses. Whenever he climbed trees or barn roofs to look for nests, Janey and I had to hold his glasses for him in case he broke them. Without them his eyes looked funny, not only boss-eyed, but naked somehow, as if they were peeled.

Janey was still holding his glasses while the man got busy with the rope, and all Biff could do was to lie there, groping with his hands and trying to squint with his boss-eyes at what was happening below. I think I really liked Biff so much because he was boss-eyed. It made him look funny and friendly at the same time. But he was a wonderful tree-climber, too, and one day, when we

A Great Day for Bonzo

were grown-up, we were going round the world together, and afterwards Janey was going to marry one of us. Neither of us knew which one nor, at the time, did she. Sometimes I thought it would be Biff because he was the best tree-climber, and then sometimes I thought it wouldn't because he was boss-eyed.

Presently the man undid the big slip-knot he had made and then made another and pulled it tighter. After that he hung the rope over his shoulder. Then he looked up. That was the first time I ever saw his face and it made me very surprised.

It was a kind, nice face, I thought, but it had a dark savage bruise under one cheekbone and it looked thin and tired. His hair was short and grey and his chin the colour of pumice stone and his moustache was the same kind as my grandfather's. It curled out and then hung loosely down and I remember wondering if, like my grandfather's did, it ever got into his tea.

After he had looked up, he took the rope off his shoulder and then started to sling it over a cross-beam. I couldn't think why he wanted to throw it over the cross-beam. It wasn't very easy to see all that was happening in the stable because the door was closed and the windows were hung with old bits of harness and horse-collars with frayed check linings and an old tin lantern with a lump of staring candle inside.

I think he threw the rope up three or four times before he realized the beam was too high. After that I saw him walk up and down the stable several times, trying to find another place.

After about a minute he came to the manger. Above the manger were wooden racks for hay. One of the racks had an iron ring in it and I saw him look up at it. He climbed onto the manger, balanced himself, and started to thread the rope through the ring.

That was when I began to wish I wasn't there. My throat felt tight and parched. I think Janey began to wish she wasn't there too because suddenly she started whimpering. I don't think Biff was frightened because he couldn't see very well. All he did was to grope about on the floor, knocking chaff-dust through the cracks and not knowing it was puffing out in little clouds.

About half a minute later the man had the rope tied to the ring. He gave it a hard wrench or two with his hands. Then he did a thing that made my throat feel tighter and more parched than ever.

He suddenly put the rope round his neck and then turned away from the wall and shut his eyes. By that time I was getting frightened.

I didn't like to see him there with his eyes shut, his legs crouching a little, just as if he was going to jump off the manger onto the floor below.

Janey was whimpering again and I was ready to cry myself when suddenly, from outside the stable, a dog started barking and scratching madly at the door. I had heard something making thin shrill sounds out there, but I thought it was simply the sound that house-martins make when they fly backwards and forwards or sit and talk to each other in the summer-time.

As soon as he heard the dog barking the man stood bolt upright again.

He snatched the rope from his neck and started yelling. "Go on, damn you! Get off—go on, damn you, get off back!"

I think the dog must have leapt as high as the top of the stable door when it heard the voice of the man calling to it from inside. I heard its claws slide down the woodwork, scratching madly. It howled too with that terrible moaning wail that dogs give when they're trapped.

When the man shouted again it made no difference. The dog wailed and leapt higher than ever at hearing his voice, and it was even worse to hear it the second time because there was a sort of overjoyed panic in the way it was fighting to get in. Then the dog hurled itself bodily against the door. I heard its skull actually hit the bottom of the door, and it was scratching madly, trying to tear a hole in the bricks of the step.

That was when the man jumped down from the manger. He jumped down so suddenly that I had forgotten the rope was still not round his neck, and I think Janey and Biff had, too. Janey started crying openly and Biff stumbled to his feet, scraping the floorboards and sending a mass of chaff-dust through the cracks.

When the man saw the dust he stopped suddenly and looked up. His face was dead white now and more drawn. Outside the door the dog was still howling and scratching and whimpering, and the man seemed undecided for a moment whether to let the dog in or come to us upstairs.

He let the dog in. It flew at him, wailing. Then it went round and round in circles, rolling on the floor. It was a small white dog, a cross between a wire-haired terrier and something else, and it had

brown-black marks on the side of its face very like the bruise on the face of the man.

" Down," he said, " down! Damn you—how did you get out? "

The dog lay on the stable floor. Its pale pink tongue was like a piece of quivering india-rubber. As it cowered there I thought for a moment the man would kick it, but instead he made a heavy, loose sort of gesture with one hand, trying to calm it. That was the first time I noticed how big his hands were. They were so big that they looked terribly naked and helpless, and he said, " Down, boy. Down. All right, boy, quiet now."

A moment later he started to come up the wooden stairs to the stable loft. I began to think of the eggs in Biff's cap and I knew that none of us ought to have been there, and then I felt sick and started shaking.

At the top of the stairs was a trapdoor. We hadn't come in that way because it was more fun to climb the wall of the bullock-yard outside and then push each other up and get through the window. None of us knew that the trapdoor was there and the sudden sight of the floorboards opening and the man's big grey head coming up through it made Janey give a little yelp, something like that of the dog.

" Who are you kids? What are you up to? " the man said. " Come on down. Come on—come on down."

Biff was the first to go down, with Janey following him and saying, " Biff, wait for your glasses. Here's your glasses, Biff."

The funny thing now was that Janey was calmer than either of us. She was the shortest of the three, smaller than I was, but she was thick and sturdy, with dark brown hair made into two short pigtails tied with thin white ribbon, and bright dark eyes.

" Don't you hit him," she said. " He can't see very well. If you hit him I'll tell the policeman."

Then Janey gave Biff his glasses back and he started to huff on them, in the way he always did before he cleaned them up, and I noticed he stood aside. I knew then that he was only afraid of being hit because of the eggs in his cap but I knew that I was afraid of everything, more than afraid: I was terrified of the man who stood there so white and tired, with his huge helpless hands, and even of the dog.

" You kids have no business up there," he said. " You know that. What were you doing up there? "

" Nothing," I said. I was sick and trembling. " Nothing."

" Up to no good," he said, " I'll bet. Up to no good."

" We were studying birds," Janey said. " We have to study birds."

" Birds'-nesting, eh? " he said. " Pinching eggs? Trespassing? The policeman can get told about that as well."

" If you tell the policeman I shall tell the policeman," Janey said. " I shall tell him what you were doing up there." She pointed to the manger. The rope still dangled from the hook.

We all looked at it, the man more drawn-faced than ever, alert

and startled. I wasn't sure if Janey knew what the rope was for. I wasn't very sure myself. But the sudden way she pointed at it, her mouth tight, her little pigtails stiffened out, and her eyes as bright as black marbles, created in the man a strange change of attitude. "Here," he said. "Here. I'll tell you what."

His voice had become soft and husky. All its tiredness seemed to rise to the surface of his throat in an enormous indrawn sigh. He bent down, snapped his fingers and thumb together and called the dog. It came over to him almost sliding on its belly. In its exhaustion it looked even wearier than he did himself, and finally it lay down in front of him, its head on its paws, panting.

"Like him? You go on home now and you can have him. I'm going to part with him," he said.

We stood in front of him with open mouths. Biff had his glasses on again and now they looked like moons.

"Go on," he said. "Take him. Call him Bonzo. That's his name." At the sound of his name the dog lifted his head.

"You want a bit of string on his collar, so you can lead him," he said, "that's all."

"Bonzo! Bonzo!" Biff said. The dog leapt to his feet, tail up, his tongue quivering, and from that moment I wasn't so afraid.

We were about a quarter of a mile down the road, going past the pond where we always found moorhens' nests on the fallen branch of willow, when Biff said he thought it was his turn to lead the dog. Up to that time Janey had been leading him. We had arranged to lead him in turns, each having him for five minutes, with me taking the second turn because I was the smallest.

We had no idea of time, but Biff said the best thing was to change over every time we counted five hundred. Neither Janey nor I could count up to five hundred nor, in fact, could Biff. But he could count up to one hundred, he said, and do it in one minute.

We were just standing by the pond, arguing about whose turn it was, with Biff saying he wouldn't get the dog a bone from the shop if I didn't let him take second turn, when suddenly the dog gave a snatch with his head, whipped the string from Janey's hand, and started back up the road.

We ran very fast and we were all about a hundred yards behind him when he reached the bullock-yard. At one time there had been a farmhouse on the far side of the yard. Now it wasn't a house any longer but was used instead as a barn for storing straw. The windows never had any glass in them and straw stuck out of the holes in the same way as it does out of the holes in a scarecrow.

Now, too, there were only bullocks in the yard in winter and never any horses in the stables except perhaps at hay-time or harvest when a man put his team there at dinner-time because it was the coolest place in the heat of the day. So as we ran across the yard to the stable beyond, the only moving things about the place were ourselves, the dog, and the house-martins flying high in the sun. Just outside the stable stood a big sycamore and the

shade of it was so black that the dog, flashing under it all doubled up with excitement, looked like a rolling snowball.

Biff could always climb trees better than I could, but he was on the fat side, and I could run much faster. I was first across the bullock-yard and first under the sycamore, and the dog himself wasn't so very far ahead of me as I reached the open stable door.

I don't know what I expected inside the stable but when I reached the stable door I stopped. It was terribly quiet inside and the stable seemed to be empty. The shade of the sycamore helped to make it dark too and my eyes, coming out of the morning sun, were dazzled. Then I heard the dog. He seemed to be somewhere far inside the stable, towards the end of the manger.

I started calling, " Bonzo! Bonzo! " and then I went inside.

Suddenly I saw him crouching in the shadows behind the staircase that went up to the loft, and beside him was the man. He was just sitting on the floor with his big hands flat on his knees, staring.

" He got away," I said. " He broke the string and we couldn't stop him. Is it all right to have him back? "

He didn't answer. There was a funny look on his face and I felt he hardly knew I was there.

Just at that moment Janey and Biff came in, both of them shouting, " Bonzo! Bonzo! " and then stopping suddenly, just as I had done, because it was dark inside and their eyes were dazzled.

" Come on, Bonzo," I said, " come on, boy," and I reached out to take him by the collar.

He started to back away. He didn't exactly show his teeth but his lips stretched like a catapult and quivered back again.

" Where is he? " Biff shouted.

" He's here," I said. " He won't come with me."

" I'll make him come," Biff said, and he started to say, " Bone—big bone, Bonzo—fat bone—me find big bone, Bonzo. Come on, Bonzo," but the dog stretched his lips again and backed away.

" Why won't he come? " Janey said. She was talking to the man but again he didn't move or answer. " Doesn't he know you said we could have him? " she said.

" Perhaps he didn't hear you say," I said. " Perhaps you ought to tell him again."

Slowly, after a moment or two, the man raised his head. He had been simply staring straight in front of him, cold and glassy, as if none of us was there. " Where do you kids come from? " he said. " Where do you live, I mean? "

" We all live in the same street," Janey said. " Biff and me live opposite each other. Biff lives at the butcher's shop. His father's the butcher."

" I work at the butcher's sometimes, too," I said. " Saturdays. Making sausages. I turn the handle of the sausage machine while Biff puts the meat in."

" We brought our dinner out for the day," Biff said, " but we've eaten it."

The man seemed to think about this. His mouth fell open a

little as he sat thinking and once he put one of his big hands up to his cheek, touching the bruise on it gently.

" Butcher's? " That was all he said, but I know he hardly knew what we were talking about. He spoke the word very slowly, like someone who couldn't spell or pronounce properly, and then went on staring again, unaware of either us or the dog.

" You tell him," I said. " You tell him and he'll come."

" Yes, you tell him," Janey said.

" We're going to lead him five minutes each," I said. " Then each one's going to keep him a week at a time."

Once again he raised his head. Every time he raised his head the dog looked up, always slowly but somehow sharply, fixing his eyes on him. It was a very curious thing, but I got the impression, each time, that the dog knew what the man was thinking.

" Here, boy," he said, and I thought at first he was talking to the dog. But then I saw that he was speaking to Biff. " He might come better if you went and got that bone."

" All right," Biff said. " All right."

" Bring it with some meat on it," the man said, " if you can. And a bit o' bread too. He likes a bit o' bread."

" Janey's uncle sells milk," I said. " Does he like milk? "

" Dogs never eat milk," Biff said. " Cats eat milk. Dogs eat bones and bread."

" We had a little dog once and he ate milk," Janey said. " I could get some milk if he eats it."

" He eats it," the man said. " He eats anything. What sort of sausages have you got? "

" We don't have any sausages Tuesdays," Biff said. " We have polonies, though. And scratchings."

" He likes scratchings," the man said. " You bring him a bit o' polony and a few scratchings and he'll do anything for you."

" Will he beg? " Janey said.

" He'll beg. You'll see," he said. " You got to make friends with him first, though."

" We'll go," Janey said to me. " You stay here."

I started to feel a little frightened again at the thought of being left alone there with the man staring so oddly in front of him, and the dog who seemed to be able to read his thoughts, and I said, " Doesn't he like cake? My mother could give me a piece of cake if he likes it. Caraway. We had some on Sunday."

" He don't like cake," he said.

A moment later Janey and Biff started to run out of the stable and I was all alone with the dog and the man, and there was no sound except his heavy breathing as he stared in front of him, and the thin whistle of the house-martins across the yard outside.

We sat for a long time alone together, not speaking. Once I remembered the rope and looked round and saw it still hanging by the hook above the manger. But for most of the time I sat staring through the open stable door, out to the black pool of sycamore shade and beyond it to where morning sunlight burnt

down on big green bunches of elderberry, part of a rusty hay-drag, and an occasional swooping bird.

I wasn't really frightened; his face was too kind for that. I only wished that Janey and Biff wouldn't be gone too long and that, sometimes, the man would talk to me instead of staring in front of his big loose hands.

I thought of several things to try to make him talk but at first he either never answered them or wasn't interested.

"Do you play jacks?" I said.

"Play what?"

"Jacks," I said. "Jack-stones. You have five stones—Janey plays. She's better than anybody. She can do all-ups and grabs and anything. Can you?"

He didn't answer again; I could see he wasn't interested in jack-stones. "Where do you live?" I said.

He didn't answer that either. I saw a martin come down and settle on the wall against the elderberry tree, his tail quivering dark in the sun. I watched him until he flew up again, snapping at something in the hot still air, and then I thought of something else to say. "Have you got a horse?" I said.

Whether he had a horse or not I never knew.

"My grandfather's got a horse," I said. "A white one. We had another white one before that but it wasn't well and we had to shoot it. Then they came and took it away and made currant jelly of its hoofs."

Sometimes the dog stirred but mostly, when the man was quiet, the dog was quiet too, lying on its belly, motionless, its head on its paws.

"Do you like Janey?" I said.

He wanted to know who Janey was and I told him, explaining at the same time: "She's either going to marry me or Biff. I don't know which yet. We shall have to wait and see."

Suddenly, for the first time, he turned on me quite fiercely. "Married?" he said. "Don't you have nothing to do with that caper."

He must have seen that I looked quite startled at his fierceness because abruptly his face altered. It seemed to lighten and broaden and suddenly, to my enormous relief and surprise, I saw him smile.

A moment later he actually turned and laughed at me. "What was that you said about horse's hoofs?" he said. "What sort o' jelly?"

"Currant."

"God alive," he said, "currant?" He even laughed a second time. "You sure it wasn't apple or summat?"

"No, currant," I said. "Red. Like you have with hare."

That seemed to put him in a better humour than ever and I said, "Which do you like best? Hare or rabbit? I like hare. My grandfather catches hares with a bit of string and a wire and a bit of stick in the hedgerows."

"Never!" he said.

I was thinking up something else to say when he laughed outright again. It almost seemed as if the dog was laughing too, and while he was still in that state of good humour, I decided to ask him something that had been troubling me for a long time. " What were you going to do with the rope? " I said.

He went back at once into his brooding, uneasy, groping stare, not answering, and again I felt terribly sorry for him because of his huge helpless hands.

" You weren't going to lasso yourself, were you? " I said.

His voice was suddenly short and fierce again. " You keep your mouth shut about that," he said. " Keep your mouth shut."

He spat on the floor as straight as you shoot out of a peashooter and then stared at the blob of spittle for a long time, again as if I wasn't there. " You never see me up there, did you? " he said.

I began to say I did see him up there.

" No, you never," he said. " You never see me."

I was going to say a second time that I had seen him but he shook his head slowly and said, " No, you never. You never see me and you ain't never goin' to tell nobody you did. Are you now? "

" No," I said.

" What you don't see you can't talk about, can you? " he said.

" No," I said.

" If you don't tell it nobody can't hear it, can they? "

" No," I said.

" That's right," he said.

We sat for a little while longer, not talking much, and then I said, " Shall I go and find some jack-stones? Then Janey can show you how to play when she comes back."

What I really wanted was the chance to get outside to see if there was a sign of Biff and Janey coming back, and I was glad when he said, " That's it. You go out and find your jack-stones. And see if you can find a little tin or summat and a drop o' water, and bring the dog a drink while you're there."

I went outside and it was hot and still in the sun. From the top bar of the gate in the bullock-yard I stood and looked across the fields and the road for a sign of Biff and Janey. The road and the fields were empty and in the distance, above the hedgerows, across the flat blue-green ears of corn, waves of heat were shimmering and dancing just like water.

Then I got over the gate and began to look in the cart track for jack-stones. Already the track was hard and baked from summer, and bits of blue chicory were flowering in the disused cart ruts, with a lot of silver-weed and shell-pink sunshades. Where the track was barer I found five stones, one almost a pure white one, about the size of a robin's egg, and then three brown ones and a greyey-blue with red veins in it, all scribbled about, just like a writing-lark's.

Then I got back over the gate and went round behind the building that used to be a house but was now a straw-barn. There

was an old gas-tarred water barrel under the eave, by the doorway, and in the nettles beside it I found an old enamel saucepan, blue outside and white inside, with a hole in it that had been plugged up with a piece of sack.

I climbed up on the barrel and looked down at the water. It was very black and about halfway up the barrel and I could see tiny red worms in it, wriggling like hairs. I started to try to catch the worms in the saucepan and at the same time I could see my face, with its smooth, almost white hair, reflected in the blackness of the water below.

I've no idea now how long I was fishing there in the water barrel; I must have lost count of time. But suddenly, side by side, with the reflection of my face in the water, there was his face. It seemed suddenly to fall out of the sky and float there without a sound. "Give us that," he said. "I'm as dry as a fish," and he took the saucepan from me and started drinking.

I was too surprised and startled to be frightened. The big gloomy face staring up at me out of that black water barrel froze the back of my neck and I wanted to start running. I actually slipped down the side of the barrel, catching my bare knee in one of the hoops, and in another second or two I should have been away, my legs melting, across the fields.

Then I saw him drinking. He was drinking like a horse, his mouth and most of the front of his face buried in the saucepan. He made a sucking, desperate sound just like a horse, and when he had emptied the saucepan once he filled a second time and then a third.

What fascinated and terrified me about all this was the thought of the worms. I knew you should never drink water out of water barrels and that if you did the worms would grow inside you and swell up and poison you and make you die. I knew there were three sure ways you could die. One was by not eating, the other was by not breathing, and the third was through drinking water out of water barrels where there were worms.

When he had finished his third saucepan of water I looked up, and stared at him and said, "You'll die, drinking that water. The worms will swell up inside you and you'll die and they'll put you in the bury-hole."

That was the worst thing I could imagine, being put in the bury-hole. That was the most terrible, awful thing in the world, I thought, but he didn't seem impressed or frightened.

"That wouldn't come amiss, would it? Not to some folks. Not to me, chance it."

I couldn't believe he was not afraid to die and I said, "You don't want to die, do you?"

"Die?" he said. "Very like they'll come a time when you'll want to die."

"No," I said. "No."

"Ah, but you never know, do you?" he said. "That's it. You never know."

I was too puzzled to answer. On his wet, stubbly face the sun shone fierce and brilliant, making the skin seem glassy and jagged. He actually started to take another drink of water. Then he changed his mind and doused the rest of the water over his face, wiping it off with big swabbing jabs of his coat sleeve.

"Where's the dog?" I said. I suddenly remembered the dog. "Where's Bonzo?"

"Tied him up," he said. "We got to take him some water." He dipped another saucepan of water from the barrel.

"Why do you want to give him away?" I said.

"He's nothing but a plague to me," he said. "He plagues me to death. I'll be glad and thankful to be shut on him."

"He's a nice dog."

"He's all right. He plagues me, though. I wish he was somewhere." We took the saucepan of water and started to walk back to the stable. "Soon as them other kids get back you can hop it," he said, "and give me a minute's peace. You can take him with you and I'll get some peace for a change."

The dog was tied up at the foot of the stairs and when we gave him the water he lapped at it without stopping for breath. "Drier 'n me," the man said and I was just beginning to feel dry myself and wondering whether I should quench my thirst by sucking one of the pebbles, like my grandfather did in the harvest field, when I heard the voices of Biff and Janey coming back across the yard.

For a few seconds I thought the eyes of the man would drop out of his head when he saw what Biff had brought.

"That's all right," he kept saying. "That's good."

Biff had brought a shin-bone of beef, a red polony sausage, and a good big handful of scratchings, all wrapped in newspaper, and Janey had nearly a pint of milk in a can. In one pocket Biff had a pork pie, wrapped in grease-proof paper, and in the other three rounds of bread.

He unwrapped the shin-bone first and then started to spread the newspaper on the floor, but the man grabbed it out of his hand.

"That ain't today's, is it?" he said.

He began to peer at the newspaper, his eyes bulging and close to the page. There were still beads of moisture on his face but I couldn't tell if they were sweat or water. His big hands made the pages crackle as he turned them over and then suddenly he folded the paper up and gave it back to Biff.

"Yesterday's, ain't it? Yesterday's," he said. "What's the date there?"

"The twenty-ninth," Biff said. "That's the day before."

"Twenty-ninth," he said. He sat thinking, again in the same huge, helpless, groping way as when we had first seen him. "Twenty-ninth—what day are we now?"

"Tuesday," Janey said. "We told you before."

"Tuesday, eh? What date was Saturday?"

"Twenty-eighth," Janey said.

Janey was always quicker than any of us but that time I was quick too. " Have you been here all that time? " I said.

" Get the grub out, get the grub out," he said.

He picked up the shin-bone. For a moment I thought he would start gnawing and tearing it with his hands. By now the dog was on its feet, straining at the string that still tied him to the stairs.

" Here, Bonzo. Bone. Bone," Biff said, and the dog started whimpering. " Come on, boy—bone. Here, boy, here—"

As the dog gave a great straining pull at the string, rushing forward and then choking himself back, whimpering again, the man raised the shin-bone with a menacing swing and said: " Don't start harbourin' him in bad habits. Git back there!—go on, git back."

" He's got to have the bone, hasn't he? " Biff said.

" All right," the man said, " but not all of a minute. The bone's to get him to go with you, ain't it? That's what you brought it for."

It must have been past midday by that time and as Biff started to unwrap the pork pie I began to feel hungry. We had eaten our dinner at half past ten, and I think Biff and Janey were hungry, too.

Biff started to get out his shut-knife, ready to cut the pie, but the man said, " Hold hard a minute. What are you cutting that for? "

" It's for us," Biff said.

" What about me? Don't I git no dinner? "

" If you like," Biff said. " You can have some polony if you like."

He grabbed the polony, tearing the top skin off with his teeth. Then he held it in his fist like a big scarlet ice-cream cone, gnawing and licking the sausage out of the top of it. Biff held out a slice of bread and he grabbed that too. All the time he never spoke a word. Once or twice the red skin of the sausage got gnawed loose but it made no difference to him: he tore it with his teeth and ate that too.

" You can have some milk if you like," Janey said.

With his mouth full of sausage he buried his face in the milk-can, drinking out of it in the same sucking, slopping way as he had drunk water from the saucepan in the yard.

" How are the scratchings? " he said. He began to eat the scratchings, throwing them into his mouth, then crunching them like nuts. Scratchings are the bits of pork leaf you get left over when lard is made. They're a brown-golden colour and crisp and they're better with salt on them. I thought perhaps he would ask for salt but it never seemed to occur to him as he threw the scratchings into his mouth and crunched them madly down.

" What about the dog? " I said suddenly. Everybody had forgotten the dog. " I thought we got the scratchings for Bonzo."

He threw a few scratchings on the stable floor, not speaking. The dog went for them as madly as he had done, licking the floor for crumbs.

" What about the bone? " Biff said. " Can't he have the bone? "

" Lotta meat on that bone," the man said.

It was true there were skinny bits of meat with a few bluish sinews left on the bone, but I hardly thought he would eat them. Then I heard his teeth grate on the bone, gnawing at flesh. It made queer cold shivers run across the small of my neck to see a man eating raw meat like a dog and once more I felt sorry for him and I know by the way Biff and Janey sat there staring, forgetting the bread and the pork pie, that they were sorry too.

Suddenly, for the first time, he seemed to become really aware of us sitting there. His eyes rolled about for a few seconds, white and big and watery, and he spat up a piece of gristle that had got caught in his throat.

That seemed somehow to wake him still more, and after he'd taken another drink of milk, he said, " You kids can bunk off now. Tie the string tight round your hand this time so he don't git loose. It's no use if you don't tie him right. He'll only git loose again."

" Like a piece of pie? " Biff said. I think we were all a little sick at the thought of the pie. After seeing him tear the flesh from the bone like that we none of us had much heart for the pie. " You can have some if you want to."

So there he was, eating the pie. Sometimes a piece of the crust, with trembling bits of jelly, fell out of his hands or his mouth onto the floor below but again it made no difference. He always picked it up, cramming it into his mouth without wiping the dirt from it or even bothering to look at it at all.

" Anybody down the road when you come back? " he said suddenly to Biff.

" No. Nobody," Biff said.

" There was a man across a field hoeing wezzles," Janey said.

" One says yes, one says no," he said. " Make up your minds."

" There was a man," Janey said, " but he was right across the field."

" All right, all right," he said. " If he's there when you go back don't say nothing—don't talk to him. If he sees you just look slippy."

" All right," we said.

He was still finishing the pie and we were still sitting on the floor, staring at him, when I remembered something I wanted to ask him. " You've got a big bruise on your face," I said. " Did you know? If you'd have thought of it Biff could have brought a piece of meat for it. A piece of meat on a bruise makes it better."

To my surprise he completely ignored the question of the bruise. I might never have asked it.

Instead he looked at each one of us in turn and then said, " Who's going to lead him this time? "

" It's my turn," Biff said.

" Who led him last time? "

" Janey started."

" All right. You lead him," he said to Biff. " Now git hold

of him tight. No half-larks. And one on you walks in front with the bone. Who's going to walk with the bone?"

"I want to," I said.

"All right," he said, "you walk in front of him with the bone. Then he'll follow you till bull's noon. All you got to do is keep in front with the bone."

"I will," I said.

The last we saw of him he was lying down on the stable floor, staring upward. "Now perhaps I can get a minute's peace," he said. "Perhaps I can get some peace now."

Outside, across the bullock-yard and down the cart track where I had found the jack-stones, it was hotter than ever, the sun straight and blinding. A few thistles were already seeding by the hedgerow but there was hardly a breath of air to blow the down away.

When we got to the gate leading out to the road, we stopped a moment and something made me get up onto the top bar of the gate and look back along the cart track, with its blue stars of chicory and sunshades drooping in the sun and tufts of bearded thistledown to where, by the sycamore, the stone walls of the stable were almost white in the sun.

"He's come out to watch us," I said.

From the gate we could see him at the door of the stable, looking round. The queer thing was that, after all, he did not seem to be looking at us. He reminded me of someone who is looking round for intruders, just to satisfy himself before locking up a house, for the last time, at night.

Suddenly he disappeared. A second later we all heard the big bolt of the stable door slam back inside. In the hot still air it was like the sound of a rifle bolt being snapped in, hard and steely, in readiness to fire.

The dog, I thought, seemed to have heard it too. Almost at once he started whimpering and scratching under the lowest bar of the gate, trying to get through.

"Start running with the bone," Biff said. "Give him a smell of the bone and then start running."

It was no good. We got him about three hundred yards beyond the pond, almost to the point where the road forks, about a mile from the town, when he suddenly doubled back, wrapped the string round Biff's legs and started back up the road.

At that moment I was ten yards or so ahead with the bone and as soon as I saw him turn I turned too and began to run after him. I realized at once that I should never catch up with him, and the only way I could think of stopping him was to throw the bone.

I threw it as hard as I could and it bounced behind him with a thump on a pile of stones at the side of the road. As soon as he heard it fall he stopped, turned, and made a grab for it. The bone was nearly as big as he was and it looked like a big red table leg as he stood there on top of the pile of stones, wagging his tail and looking for the first time very pleased with himself, and very sharp and cheeky.

"Drop it! Drop it!" I said.

"Shut up!" Biff said. "Now he's got the bone he'll come as easy as pie. Won't you, Bonzo? You'll come now, won't you?" He started slapping his knees with his hands and looking appealingly at Bonzo through his big moon spectacles, at the same time approaching him gently, calling his name and sometimes whistling. "Come on, Bonzo boy. Come on, boy, come on—"

The dog actually dropped the bone on top of the pile of stones and then stood with his mouth open and his tongue out, laughing.

"Good boy, Bonzo," Biff said. "That's a boy—"

He suddenly rushed forward to grab his collar but in a second Bonzo picked the bone up and dived back into the tall grasses along the roadside and then through a blackthorn hedge and into the field beyond.

At that point the blackthorn hedge was too thick and prickly for the three of us to get through but there was a gate thirty or forty yards up the road and in a few seconds we were climbing over it into the field. The oats growing right up to the gate and the hedgerow were twice as tall as us and were a soft pink-yellow colour, ripe for cutting. There was no sign of the dog. I watched for the oat stalks to start moving but nothing stirred and there was no sound except the sound of grasshoppers whirring in the heat of noon and a yellow-hammer singing the same few notes over and over again on another side of the field.

"Bonzo! Bonzo!" We called him over and over again but he made no answer. I got on my knees and tried to look through the rows of oat stalks but on the headland they were running the wrong way and it was like looking into a forest of pink-yellow straw all tangled with thistle stalks, pink convolvulus, and little flowers of scarlet pimpernel.

Then Janey, who was always so quick, thought she heard him farther down the hedgerow. We all listened and I thought I heard him too, panting softly.

"Let's track him," Biff said. "Get down. Start tracking."

We started to go off in Indian file down the hedgerow, Biff leading, Janey next, and I coming on behind. Every few yards we stopped, crouched down, and listened. Sometimes there was a sudden faint stirring down the rows of oat stalks but it never went on for long and it might have been only a rabbit, or field-mouse, or a bird.

"He must be in the other field," I said. "Let's look in that."

"I know where he is," Janey said. "He's gone back to the barn."

"No," Biff said, "he's in here. I know he is, I can smell the bone." He turned round from where he was crawling on his hands and knees and looked back at us with his funny eyes that always seemed to be swimming out of one side of his thick watery spectacles and said, "You can smell it. You smell. You can smell the bone."

For a minute we all stopped and smelt. Perhaps Biff was more used to the smell of meat than I was. I couldn't smell anything except the ripe oats, the seeds of grasses, and the clay earth turned dry and dusty until it was ripe, too, from days of sun.

" I can't smell anything either," Janey said. " I'll go back to the barn if you like and see if he's there."

" No," Biff said. " I can smell it. It's over there."

I suppose we had crawled about a quarter of the way round the field before, as we stopped for the tenth or eleventh time, we heard another sound. It was a harsh, crisp, swishing sound, regular and steady, and neither Biff nor Janey knew what it was.

But I knew what it was. " It's a man with a scythe," I said. " He's mowing round the field."

All three of us lay down in the grass by the hedgerow, listening, not daring to breathe. Then after a few moments I moved over towards the oats and parted some of them with my hands and looked down the rows. The rows were very straight there and this time they ran parallel with the hedgerows so that, some distance down them, I could actually see the scythe swinging and biting into them and just behind them the trouser legs of the man, his boots summer-dusty, the calves of the trousers tied up with bits of string.

Suddenly the man stopped mowing. I saw the blade of his scythe flash white as he laid it down on the stubble. Then he moved away and I could not see him for a moment or two but presently I heard him spit once or twice and after that there was a sound of water trickling by the hedgerow. Biff started laughing into his hands and then I saw the man come back.

He laid his jacket on the last swathe of oats he had mown and then sat down on it and began to unpack his dinner, a lump of bread-and-cheese, some onions, and a big blue can of tea, from out of a round straw dinner bag. Before he started to eat he spread his handkerchief on his knees and took out a big clasp-knife and wiped it on his trousers. The handle of the knife was thick crinkly bone and the handkerchief was red with big white spots on.

All that time none of us dared move and then, down the rows and a little to the left, between myself and the man, I caught sight of something else.

It was Bonzo, lying in the rows of oats with his feet on the bone. As soon as I saw him I was so excited that I forgot everything else: the man, Janey and Biff, where we were and how we were not supposed to be there and what might happen to us if we were found. I was so excited that before I could stop myself I was calling him by his name.

" Bonzo! " I said. " Bonzo—"

I hadn't called him more than twice before he bolted. He went straight forward, crashing through three or four yards of oats and then leaping clean past the man eating his dinner on the stubble beyond.

The man let out a yell as the dog leapt past him and I think

he was more frightened than we were as we turned and started running. The last I saw of him was a glimpse of his brown bald head as he snatched off his cap and threw it at the dog.

A moment or two later we were crashing through a gap in the hedgerow, out into a pasture field beyond, and skulking and scurrying down the ditch like terrified leverets, panting for breath. When we reached the road there was no sign of Bonzo. You could see the empty white curve of the road quivering at each end with shimmering waves of heat, and again there was no sound in the hot midday air but the whir of grasshoppers, and the short tinkling song of yellow-hammers along the hedgerows.

"He must have gone across the fields," Biff said. "That way."

"I bet he didn't," Janey said. "I bet he went to the barn. He *wants* to go to the barn—can't you see?—that's where he *wants* to go."

Biff thought the field and Janey thought the barn. I couldn't make up my mind where he would go. I was really thinking about the man with the scythe and how he would probably chase us. All I really wanted was to be able to find the dog, take him back home and start making a kennel for him and teach him to fetch stones, but Biff said, "All right. I'll go across the field and look and Janey go to the barn and look. And you," he said to me, "stop here."

"I don't want to stop here—"

"You stop here," he said. "You guard the road. You be sentry."

I didn't want to be sentry. But I was the youngest and whenever there were things they felt I was too young to do they always made me sentry.

"You sit on top of the stones and keep your eyes skinned," Biff said.

"And if he comes," Janey said, "catch him and hold him by the collar and tie him to a tree."

I don't know why, but I felt uneasy and queer as soon as Janey went up the road, and I hadn't been sitting long on the pile of stones before I began to wish we had never let her go back there all alone. Somehow I couldn't get out of my head the picture of the man with the rope, how he had drunk the water with worms in it and eaten raw meat off the bone and how, above all, he just sat there with his uneasy groping stare and his enormous helpless hands.

Janey, I thought, if you're not back soon—I'll count a hundred and if you're not back then I'll come and look for you.

I don't know how long I sat on the pile of stones all by myself, between the high blackthorn hedges that already had their little grey-green sloes on them, in the hot still sun, waiting for Janey and Biff to come back.

I didn't know until afterwards that all the time I was sitting there playing with the stones and looking underneath them and

pretending to count up to a hundred, something strange was happening to Janey in the stable.

When she got back to the stable the door was open. After a few moments she went inside and looked about her, but neither Bonzo nor the man was there. Then she went outside and stood for a moment under the big sycamore, listening.

After a time she thought she heard a sound. It seemed to come from the direction of the building that had once been a farmhouse. She went across the bullock-yard towards the house and presently she saw the man standing by the water barrel, muttering to himself.

" Have you seen the dog? " she said. " Have you seen Bonzo? We've lost him again."

He turned on her, startled. She told me afterwards how his eyes looked strange and green. I never really believed that. Nobody's eyes could ever look green, I thought, but I believed her when she said, " Don't you remember how Arthur Burgess looked when he thought he'd eaten the poison-berries? He looked like that. He looked bad, as if he was going to die."

I knew then what was really the matter with him. I knew that he was going to die because he'd drunk water with worms in it.

Then before she could say anything else, he turned on her and said, " You git outa here—go on, git out on it. Allus vapourin' round, you kids—git out on it. Leave me be."

" We want Bonzo," she said. " I think he came back here. Did he come back? "

He didn't answer. She said he seemed to go faint suddenly, and gave a big shiver, standing there in the sun. His face was terribly pale, she said, and the bristles on his face stood out like stiff dark prickles.

Then he started to wander back towards the stable, groping his way. She followed him, saying a few things, asking questions, mostly about Bonzo, which he never answered.

At last he was in the stable and once more he lay down on the floor. He lay with his face away from her for a time, muttering, half speaking things with little groans. She sat down on the floor beside him, sorry for him, and asked him several times if he felt bad and once if he wanted water.

At the mention of water he turned and looked at her as if he were seeing her there for the first time. " Do you go to school? " he said. " Can you write? "

" Yes, I can write," she said. " Miss Jackson says I'm a good writer."

He didn't speak for a time. Instead he fumbled in his pockets until finally he brought out a stub of pencil and then a piece of paper. " You know where Blackland Spinneys are? " he said.

" Yes," she said. " We sometimes go primrosing there."

He started to give her the piece of paper and the pencil as if he were going to ask her to write something down. But suddenly he changed his mind and put them back in his pocket. It was hard to know what he meant by these sudden changes of mind but it

was harder still when he said, " Do you read the Bible at school? Do you say prayers and all that? "

" Yes," she said.

" Say something."

She had no idea what to say. The first thing that came into her head was *The Lord is my Shepherd.*

" Shall I say that? " she said.

" Say that," he said. " That'll do."

" *The Lord is my Shepherd,*" she said. " *I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures.*"

" God," he said, once or twice. " God. Oh God."

It was all a mystery to her why he wanted those words. All the time she was saying them she kept her eyes on his face. It was utterly quiet in the stable, in the coldish shade of it, out of the sun, but she was never frightened. And the reason why she was never frightened, she told us afterwards, was because the strange, funny, cold-drawn look on his face gradually went away as she sat there. He lay quiet and tranquil, as if after a long and terrible tiredness he had started to drop to sleep.

He spoke to her, in fact, only once or twice more, and then with his eyes still closed. " Don't you come back here no more, you kids," he said. " Hear that? Don't you come back no more—I shan't be here."

" Supposing Bonzo comes back? "

" He won't come back. He'll only come back if he knows I'm here. And I shan't be here. I'll be gone for good in a minute or two."

She stood for a few moments longer before he finally asked her to go, saying, " Shut the door." Then as she stood at the stable door, just before shutting it, she remembered something. " What about Blackland Spinneys? " she said. " Is that where you live? "

He didn't answer.

" Do you feel better now? " she said.

He didn't answer that either.

" Thank you for Bonzo," she said.

By the time she came down the road again to where I was waiting on the pile of stones, Biff had come back too. There was no sign of Bonzo.

Then when Janey began to tell us all that had happened in the stable and the bullock-yard, how the eyes of the man were green and how ill he looked, as if he were going to die, I began to get more and more excited.

" He's going to die! " I said. " He's going to die. I saw him drinking the water with the worms in it. That's the way you get poisoned. That's the way you die."

" Die? " Biff said. " You can't die from drinking water."

" You can," I said. " You can. Water out of ditches. Water with worms in it."

" Then," Biff said, " how is it dogs don't die? How is it birds don't die? They drink water out of ditches. How is it cows don't

die? They drink water with newts in it. And frogs. How is it they don't die?"

"Sometimes they do."

"Yes, but not next minute. They don't drop down dead next minute."

"Let's go and catch newts," Janey said. "We can paddle too."

"We haven't got Bonzo," Biff said, "have we? We can't go without Bonzo."

We sat there for a few minutes longer trying to decide what to do when suddenly a man pushed his head over the gate farther down the road and said, "You kids! is this your dog? I nearly cut him a-two—you want to get him killed? Whyn't you take him home and chain him up somewhere?"

It was the man with the scythe. He had Bonzo gripped tight by the collar. "He's all covered in burrs and thistles," the man said. "Got one or two in his foot too, I fancy. That'll stop him capering off too far. Now you just git off home and take him with you."

As we went down the road we were all so happy that we forgot completely, for the first time, about the man in the stable. And this time, everything went right with Bonzo. Biff held him really tight by the string. And, as the man said, there were thistles in his foot and sticky burrs all over his body, so that he limped a bit, seemed almost, I thought, like a plum-pudding dog.

He looked a little sorry for himself, too, I thought, sometimes hopping on three legs and holding the other in the air. The thistles in his foot were just what we wanted. We knew, with them, that he couldn't run very far.

Presently we decided that Janey, because she was a girl, should have Bonzo first and keep him for one week from that very afternoon.

Janey's father worked on the railway. Sometimes he worked on night shift. You went up to Janey's house by a brick entry where her mother hung out the washing on wet days, and beyond the entry was an asphalt yard, and then a little garden where her father grew rows of onions, big clumps of red and yellow dahlias, and a few potatoes. When he wasn't working on day shift, Janey's father would sit in the middle of his garden, on a broken kitchen chair, in a tiny square of grass that he clipped with scissors, and stare at his plants with pride and wonder.

Sometimes he put his plants into flower shows, and that afternoon I thought he would explode when he saw Janey leading the dog down the ash path between the onions and potatoes.

"Get that dog out of here!" he shouted. "Who brought that in? Who let that out? Go on!" he yelled. "Get out—get out of here!" He began to pick up stones.

"He's ours," Janey started to say. "Biff's and mine and—"

"Take him back where he belongs!" her father bellowed. "Get him out of here!"

After that we led him slowly across the street to our house. I

knew my mother didn't like dogs; I knew my father didn't like dogs either. But it was in my mind to ask if Bonzo could live with my grandfather, who was a very nice, genial, easy-going man who kept a little farm where, at threshing-time, thousands of rats came out from under corn-stacks.

In the house it was very hot, the blinds were drawn, and my mother was asleep in the sitting-room.

I went out into the street again and told the truth to Biff and Janey. "My mother's asleep," I said. "I daredn't wake her."

Biff was glad. "My father likes dogs," he said. "I bet he's a good ratter. My father'll like him if he's a good ratter."

Janey and I stood outside the butcher's shop while Biff went into the shop with Bonzo. Blue-and-white-striped awnings covered the windows of the shop and there was a queer faint sickly smell of meat in the hot air.

Biff's father was a fat stocky man with red cheeks and ears, a bluish bald head and a funny way of being nice to you one day and not speaking to you the next. My mother said it was the smell of the meat: it made him liverish. Sometimes if I helped in the shop, with Biff, he gave me pigs'-tails. I liked pigs'-tails. There isn't much meat on a pig's-tail, but the little there is is very tasty.

"Well, look on his collar!" we heard Biff's father shouting. "Haven't you got sense enough to look on his collar? He belongs to somebody, doesn't he? There must be a name on the collar!"

In another moment he came outside, dressed in his blue-and-white apron with the big steel hanging from his waist, dragging Bonzo by the scruff of the neck. I could see he was in one of his liverish tatchy moods. He was purplish-hot in the face and he almost lifted the dog off the ground as he dragged it onto the pavement and said, "Here, what does it say there? What does it say on the collar?"

Biff squatted down and turned Bonzo's collar round and then read out, "*Bonzo. J. Slater. High Farm. Blacklands Spinneys. Evensford.*"

"Well, now you know," his father said. "He belongs up at Blacklands. Take him back there."

None of us knew what to say.

"Go on—take him back. He's strayed. Take him back there—or else down to the police station. One of the two—but I don't want him here. I won't have a moocher like that about the place."

We led him down the street. He was still limping from the thistle in his foot and I thought he looked tired and thirsty. I was getting a little tired and thirsty myself, and Janey said, "Perhaps my uncle would have him. He could help get the cows in."

But it was no use: her uncle said dogs were bad for cows. They worried them something chronic.

"You start off now and take him back," Janey's uncle said. "That's your best tip. You don't want a policeman to see you, do you?"

That was the last thing we wanted. We remembered what the man in the stable had said. Up to that time we hadn't thought much more about him, but now Biff said, " Perhaps we ought to take him back to the stable. Shall we? "

" He said we were never to go back there," Janey said. " Never. He wanted to get a little peace, he said, and we wasn't to go back."

" All right," Biff said. " We'll have to take him back to this farm. At Blacklands."

Then Janey remembered something. The word Blacklands reminded her of the time she had sat in the stable with the man and how he had said to her suddenly, " Do you know a place called Blacklands Spinneys? "

" It's the same place," she said.

" All right," Biff said. " I expect that's his home. Let's go up there."

After we had been walking some time—the way to the spinneys was all uphill and the road was white with heat and we rested several times—I remembered something, too.

" I wonder if he's dead yet," I said.

" He can't die," Biff said, " not from drinking water. Act sharp—I told you."

" If you die," I said, " can you come alive again? "

" No," Biff said. " It's just like meat. Meat can't come alive again, can it? Nobody can come alive."

" Jesus did," Janey said.

Janey was always so quick and clever and this time Biff couldn't answer. After that I couldn't make up my mind whether people could come alive again or not, and I began to be worried by the thought of the man in the stable and what we had seen there. I wondered, if he died, whether, when we went to look for martins' nests again, we might not find him there.

" I want to go home," I said.

" Oh! don't be a kid," Biff said. " Come on."

Perhaps it was not more than a mile up that road, between the woods dark and thick with summer, the birds in them quiet in the still afternoon and the primrose leaves burnt in the ditches by the heat of July, but the road was straight and white and hot, and it seemed much farther.

Once we came to a pond and we stopped for a few moments to let Bonzo drink in it. All round the pond were thin tall reeds like dark green spears with a few bulrushes among them and pink sprays of willow-herb. On the far side stood a clump of elder trees and it was shady there. Part of the water was thick with water-lilies and between the leaves little circles kept springing up and dying away.

" Look," Janey said. " Fish. Coming up to breathe."

" Fish can't breathe," Biff said. " If they breathe they die."

" No, they don't," Janey said. " They have to have air, like people."

" You don't know anything," Biff said.

"Nor do you," Janey said. "Boys don't know everything. They think they do."

I thought it was nice by the water, with the tall cool reeds, the shade of the elder trees, the flat shining water-lilies, the water with its little spreading circles, and hardly a sound in the air but the dog lapping water as he drank at the edge of the pond.

After a time we walked on again, slowly, tired now in the heat, even the dog flagging, and I was just beginning to wonder if we should ever get there and if Biff perhaps wasn't after all something like his father, moody and tatchy because the smell of the meat got into him, when Janey said, "There's the house."

We stopped.

The house stood in a clearing of the wood. It was a house that you might have thought had been some kind of church at one time. Its windows were long and narrow and rounded at the top. In the half circle at the top of the window the glass was blue and yellow, with sometimes a piece of green. Over the front porch, which had sections of coloured glass in it too, fell drooping masses of ivy. At the back were a few brick outbuildings, roofed in corrugated iron that shone brown with rust in the sun. Underneath them stood bits of machinery, rusty too, with old barrows, a water cart, a hay rake, and several churns.

What made you think of a church, too, were four big yew trees that flanked the path leading down to the road. I didn't like these trees; they made me feel unhappy. I didn't like the way the road ended just beyond them, either, the white line of it cut off by a gate, and how the woods beyond it, dense and taller now, went on and on, unbroken.

"Let's go back," I started to say, and then I noticed something terribly strange about the dog.

"He's shamming dead," I said.

The dog was lying flat on his side, with his eyes closed and all four legs crooked and limp, as if he had broken them.

" Come on," Biff said and began trying to pull him to his feet by the collar.

Bonzo didn't get up. Biff pulled him about a foot along the grass and then dropped him in the same position.

" Perhaps he's hurt," I said. " Perhaps it's the thistle in his foot." Even Biff didn't think that was silly, and we spent some time trying to clean his feet of thistles. Each time we lifted a foot, it dropped back again, as if it was dead.

" Now you can come," Biff said. " You're all right now, Bonzo. Come on now—come on, boy."

Biff pulled hard on the string in a sudden jerk and Bonzo actually got to his feet. A moment later he started to behave like a mule. He dug his hind legs into the grass and showed a thin slip of his teeth and hardened the muscles of his chest so that Biff couldn't drag him.

" Come on," Biff said. " You've got to come. Push him. Push him from behind." The first moment we pushed him he let out a growl. It was the first time he had growled at us all day. It was guttural and hard. I didn't like it. Then I remembered suddenly that if dogs bit you, you went mad and then you died.

" He won't bite us, will he? " I said.

" Not if you're not frit of him," Biff said. " If you're frit, he'll bite you. Come on, Bonzo, I'll show you who's master."

Biff went on for about another five minutes trying to show Bonzo who was master. It was very hot trying to lug Bonzo to his feet and soon Biff's eyes began to look more and more like jelly beans and his glasses were misty with sweat. All the time Bonzo dug his legs into the grass, like a mule, and wouldn't budge.

Then Janey tried with him. She lifted one of the lids of his eyes and peered into it. " Why won't you come, Bonzo? " she said. " Bonzo, look at me," but she might have been peering into an empty buttonhole.

" We'll just have to go in and tell the people we've got him out here," she said.

" Who's going? " Biff said.

" You go," Janey said.

" I've done all the pulling and tugging," Biff said. " You go."

" You're the biggest," she said. I was suddenly afraid they would send me because I was the smallest, and I began to feel cold in my neck, my hair tingling like little watch springs.

" If somebody doesn't tell them we'll have to go to the police station," Janey said.

" Don't let's go to the police station," I said.

" They might lock us all up," Janey said. " They might say we stole the dog."

That seemed to impress Biff and he started hesitating. After he had hesitated a moment or two Janey said, " Go on, Biff. You're the bravest. You always are."

I think Biff liked that. He didn't look half so fagged after that and he said, " I've got to clean my specs first, though. You hold him tight while I clean my specs."

Then he took off his glasses and huffed on them and started polishing them on his handkerchief, sometimes squinting through them, so that he looked funnier and more cock-eyed than ever. I thought he spent a little more time on his glasses than usual, and sometimes you might have thought he was a soldier, polishing his kit before going on parade.

Then he stood up. He pulled his big brown cap lower over his eyes and said, " Hang on to him hard. Both of you. One of you take his collar and the other hold the string."

" All right," we said, and we crouched down low in the grasses, holding Bonzo down.

Then Biff walked down the road to the house. I was glad I didn't have to go to that house, with its queer churchy windows, the black yew trees that made me unhappy, and the way it seemed to stand neglected and isolated, in a gap in the woods, at a dead end.

When Biff got to the house he went round the back of it and knocked on the kitchen door. The farmyard was empty. He told us afterwards he knocked three or four times and that no one answered. Then he thought he heard sounds from somewhere farther along that side of the house and he thought they seemed to come from an outhouse, a wash-house or a dairy, at the end of the path.

He went along the path until he got to an open door. It was in fact just a sort of outhouse, and inside it was a girl. She was sitting on a chair, plucking a chicken, and she was wearing a black pinafore.

Somehow, by the way she looked up at him, big-eyed and startled, he knew that she was frightened. He was half frightened himself and he started to ask her if her name was Slater. As he said that, she gave a sudden start, half getting up from the chair, so that before she could prevent it the half-plucked chicken slipped from her lap and she just grabbed it in time, by one leg, before it fell to the floor.

" What made you ask that? " she said. " Who are you? Where did you come from? "

" I've got your dog," Biff said. " I've got Bonzo."

She stood up, still holding the chicken by its leg, loose and naked, at her side. She was a tall girl, with a lot of heavy black hair and no colour in her face except brown smoky circles under her eyes. Biff thought she looked about nineteen or twenty. He couldn't tell. Perhaps she was more, perhaps twenty-five. He hadn't time to think much about things like that before she suddenly grabbed him and pulled him into the outhouse and started jabbering questions.

" What made you think my name was Slater? " she said. " Where did you find the dog? "

She jabbered so fast, her mouth loose and quivering, that he

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never got the break of a second to answer a single question until she had been talking for several minutes. Then she seemed to think of something. For a moment she actually stopped talking and looked out of the door quickly, up and down the yard.

Then he said, " We got him from a man. In a barn. He said we could—"

" What barn? Where? What barn? " she said.

She suddenly knelt down and gripped him by the hands. " Tell me what barn. Where? Where was it? Tell me where it was."

He began to try to tell her where it was but she interrupted him again, shaking her head backwards and forwards nervously, her eyes big and close to his face.

" What was he like? " she said. " Had he got grey hair? Were his hands big? What was he doing there? "

" He was acting funny," Biff said.

" How? How do you mean? Where? How do you mean, he was acting—funny? How? "

Biff started to tell her how we had seen the man drink the barrel water and gnaw raw meat off the bone, but again she didn't let him get very far. Again she smothered him with questions. Then at last she suddenly dropped the chicken on the chair and seized hold of his hands, and said, " Where did you say you had the dog? Where? "

" Just down the road," he said. He hadn't told her before. She hadn't given him a chance and now he thought she would cry as he told her.

" How far down the road? " she said.

" A little way—"

" You go back," she said. " You go back now and start walking down the road. You start walking. Start walking, don't speak to anybody and in a minute I'll catch up with you."

A moment later, and before he could move to go, she was standing bolt upright. At the same time she made a grab for the chicken. She actually started plucking at it with her free hand, not looking at it. All the time she was staring at the doorway, and when Biff turned he saw what she was looking at.

In the doorway was a man. He was tall, too, and thin, with straight black trousers held up by a belt. Biff took particular notice of the belt because it was like one his father used on him sometimes when the meat got into him and he was liverish and tatchy.

The man was slightly hump-shouldered too, in the sort of way that men get when they work on the land, stooping, and there was something peculiar about his eyes. Biff said he thought at first he was cock-eyed, like himself, and then he saw that the lid of one eye had been cut badly and hadn't healed properly, so that one side of it was screwed up by a dark scar, giving it a leer.

" Catch up? " he said. " Catch up with who? "

She didn't answer. Her eyes looked frozen while her hands darted about the chicken, plucking it.

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" Who's this? " the man said. His voice was hollow, crabby, and grating. " Who's he? "

Then before the girl could stop him Biff said, " I brought a dog back. Is your name Slater? "

" Who? " The man turned on him sharply and swiftly. The shadow of an arm hooked over and the girl jabbered, " Don't tell him nothing. Don't tell him nothing. Don't tell him."

" What dog? What dog? " the man said. Biff tried to step backwards out of the outhouse but the man put his foot in the doorway and said, " No, you don't. What dog? Who sent you here? "

" Don't tell him! " the girl shouted.

" Shut your mouth! " he said to her. " I'm talking—"

" Run," she said. " Run. You run now."

" Nobody's running," the man said. " Not him and not you. The only one who's running ain't here and ain't likely to be—"

" Run," she said. " You run now."

She made a sudden imploring gesture with her hands, forgetting the chicken. It slipped out of her grasp, falling to the floor.

Before she could move to pick it up the man stooped and grabbed it by the legs. For a moment Biff thought he would hit her with it. He actually swung it in the air and the girl actually put her hands to her face to protect herself, saying, " You hit me. Go on. Hit me. You hit me again and see. You hit me once before—I thought you'd learnt that lesson—"

" I'm your father, ain't I? " he said. " I ain't your father for nothing, am I? "

" You can hit me a thousand times," she said, " and it won't make no difference. I want him and I'll have him—chance what you say—"

He suddenly threw the chicken down on the table. She didn't flinch this time. She stood her ground, Biff said, bolt upright, her eyes staring. The man made a guttural sound in his throat—it might have been that he was going to spit at her, Biff thought—and then he seemed to realize, for the first time, that Biff had heard all that was going on and he said, " You git outa here. Go on. Make yourself scarce and don't come nosin' round folk's backdoors another time. Go on! " He started shouting suddenly. " Go on! "

Biff was frightened and started running. He hadn't gone more than half a dozen steps down the path before she sprang to the door and screamed after him, " His name's Slater. That man—the man in the barn. Tell him it's all right—tell him to come here—"

" You tell him no such thing! " the man yelled. " Git out on it afore I limb you—you and the dog too! "

The girl broke free and started to run down the path. After a few paces the man caught up with her and after that all Biff could hear was his voice, shouting, " He thought he'd killt me, didn't he? How many more times do I have to din it into you? It's all over and done with, I tell you, it's finished. Get that into your daft

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miserable head! Any more from you and I'll shoot you and him and the dog too."

At the gate of the yard Biff's fingers were trembling so much that, for a moment, he couldn't undo the latch. And as he stood there trembling and fumbling, he thought he recognized a familiar sound: the swish of a strap and the sound of a buckle beating.

I suppose we had been sitting by the pond for ten minutes or so, resting in the shade of the elder trees, behind the thick tall lines of reed, when the dog began to behave queerly for the second time.

This time he didn't lie down and stiffen himself and pretend to be dead. He suddenly stood up, looked in the direction of the woods, and cocked his ears. Then his throat began to quiver, giving out a low rumble, like a toy dynamo. Then suddenly his tail went up and you could feel him bristling.

"I think he can smell a rabbit or something," I said.

"He can *hear* something," Biff said. All about us there was nothing but the deep soundless calm of afternoon, stretching far away through long woods, hot and without a breath of air. "Dogs can hear things people can't. Listen!"

We lay and listened, our faces in the grass. I held my breath, hearing nothing but the tiny whir of insects in the heat, hidden somewhere among grass and reeds. Then suddenly I couldn't hold my breath any longer. I gulped and a puff of grass seed seemed to get into my mouth, so that I choked and started coughing.

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"Shut up!" Biff said.

"I can't help it—"

"Shut up," he whispered.

We lay for a few moments longer, listening. This time I lay on my side and the grasses looked like a gold forest, the tallest stalks like trees, the bits of totty-grass trembling like ferns above red-yellow tufts of egg-and-bacon flowers. There was still nothing I could hear except the click and whir of insects about the pond, and then Biff said, "You keep hold of Bonzo. I'm going to look out on the road."

We watched him squirm on his belly round the pond. He looked like an Indian tracking animals, and while I watched him I wished I was an Indian, too, and we had a wigwam to sleep in, with Janey as our squaw. Then Biff disappeared behind a hawthorn bush and I couldn't see him for a time.

But presently I saw his face in the grasses, turning to come back to us. Whenever Biff was specially excited his spectacles slipped a bit—they were really always too big for him and sometimes he wound bits of wool round the bridge to keep them on his nose a little better—and his eyes started groping and getting bigger and bigger as they tried to look through the lenses and not over the top.

Now I could see his spectacles were almost on the end of his nose by the time he crawled back to us. "It's the man," he said. "The one from the house. He's coming down the road with a gun."

As we all slipped down the bank and lay still farther in the reeds I could still hear nothing but the sound of insects clicking and whirring in the hot afternoon. The dog had stopped his grumbling. Now we made him lie down too and Biff unbuttoned his jacket and wrapped it over his head.

After we had been lying there like that for a minute or two, the dog not moving now or making a sound, I began to hear the footsteps of the man coming down the road between the woods. The road was not more than ten or fifteen yards away from us and the footsteps were slow and shuffling on the dry loose stones.

It seemed about an hour later before they stopped. All the time I was afraid I would start choking again and I kept my hands over my mouth, pressing my head against the hard clay bank of the pond and shutting my eyes. I opened them only once, just for a second, and I saw that Janey had her eyes closed, too. But the lashes were quivering and she was biting her bottom lip hard on one side.

Then the man started walking again. At first I couldn't tell if he was walking farther down the road or if he had turned now and was walking back again, towards the house. In the middle of wondering, I thought of the house and how dark it was, with the big yews and the strange churchy-coloured windows, and how it seemed cut off from everywhere, isolated in the clearing of the woods, at the beginning of nowhere.

I knew I didn't want to go into that house, or even near it; or even to see it again, and I was suddenly frightened that the man would find us there by the pond and be angry, as he had been with

the girl and Biff, and take us back to the house with the gun and lock us up there.

Then after a long time I couldn't hear the footsteps. It was not only quiet in the afternoon. The air was tingling everywhere and it made you tremble in your veins. At the same time I couldn't be sure if the man had walked away altogether or if he was still there, somewhere on the road, behind a hawthorn bush, watching and waiting for us to move. I could still feel him in the air and I wouldn't have been surprised suddenly to have looked through the grasses and seen his feet standing there, just as I had seen the feet of the man through the standing straws in the oat field. And somehow I knew that neither Biff nor Janey was sure about him, either, and that they were wondering, too, how long they had to lie there listening and waiting, trembling in their veins.

I think we might have gone on lying there until darkness if it hadn't been, once again, for the dog. All of a sudden he struggled out from under Biff's jacket, stood on his feet, and shook himself from head to foot with a shudder.

After that he went down to the edge of the pond and started drinking. The sound of him lapping the water was like somebody clapping their hands. And soon the three of us were lying there with him, at the foot of the bank, not drinking but dabbling our hands in cool water and then splashing it over our faces and our hair. "Were you frit?" Biff said.

"No," I said.

"No," Janey said.

"I think Bonzo was a bit frit, though," Biff said.

"I wasn't frit until Bonzo was," I said.

"Nor was I," Janey said. "I wasn't frit till he was."

"Good old Bonz," Biff said. "Good old boy. Good Bonz."

"What are we going to do with him now?" Janey said.

"That's it," Biff said. "What are we going to do with him? What are we going to do with you, Bonz, eh?"

Biff stroked him hard on the back of his neck and the dog took a last lap of the pond water and then hopped up the bank and started to walk towards the road. Our faces and hands were still wet as we followed him. I knew somehow it was all right to follow him and I wasn't frightened any more.

"Where shall we take him?" Janey said.

"We'll stop at the end of the road," Biff said, "and have a powwow. You haven't tried your house, yet," he said to me.

After that we took another look up the road, at the long dusty white slit of it narrowing away between parched summer woods, empty in the straight sunlight, and then started running.

We were still running, the dog in front of us, when about half a mile down the road a figure suddenly came running out of the woods to meet us.

It was the girl and she hadn't even washed the blood from her arms.

She was carrying a bag now, a sort of oilcloth bag, black and

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shining, with a string handle, just like the one my grandmother used for bringing tea to us in the harvest field. You could see bits of clothing and newspaper sticking out of the top of it, as if she hadn't had time to pack it properly.

She also had a comb in her free hand and two hairpins in her mouth but when she stopped she pushed the comb into the bag and started to fix the pins in her hair. "Where's that man?" she said. "The one you saw? The one you told me about? All right, Bonzo, all right. Down now, Bonzo, down."

We started to tell her that the man was in the stable but the dog was so excited, whimpering and crying, jumping up against her skirt and twisting his body to and fro in excitement, that I don't know if she heard us or not.

All she said was: "Could you take me there? Could you show it to me, please?" and she said this several times, still trying to fix the pins in her hair with one hand. Once or twice she looked back up the road but there was no sign of anyone there, and Biff said: "That man started coming. He was coming down there with a gun in his hands."

"That's all right. That doesn't matter," she said. "You tell me where the other man was. Where was he?"

The dog was a little quieter by that time, and she was able to hear what we said about the stable. "You get to it by a track," we said. "Across fields. Nobody lives there."

"Take me," she said. "Show me, will you? Is there a short cut there?"

"We can go by the brook," Janey said.

"There isn't a bridge that way," I said.

"We can paddle over in the shallow place by the spring," Biff said. "Where the sticklebacks are."

"Do we have to go through the town that way?" the girl said.

"No," Biff said. "No. Nowhere near the town."

"That's good," she said. "That's good. I don't want to go near the town."

Except that she had to stop once and put down the bag and refix the pins in her hair because they had fallen loose again, she hardly changed her pace as we went with her through the fields, by the short cut, along by the brook where we sometimes fished.

There was a kingfisher there that afternoon, and it came swooping downstream in such a flash of blue and copper, crying thinly, that I was startled and Janey let out a little cry. But the girl either didn't see it or didn't give it a second thought if she did. She just kept walking, not so very fast, as it seemed, but with long strides, springing on her heels and swinging her long scarred arms. All the time her head was slightly down and her thick hair kept falling into her neck and sometimes partly onto her shoulders.

At one of the stiles we had to climb, she turned on us, without really stopping, and said, "When did you first see him? How long ago was that?"

"In the morning," Biff told her. "A long time ago."

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You like some people the first time you see them, even if they're not very happy. I could see that she was not happy. I didn't know why, but her eyes were dark and the way she kept trying to pin up her hair was troubled and restless and queer.

But I knew I liked her and because I liked her I felt there was something she ought to know. " I think he'll be dead by now," I said. " I think he was going to die—"

" What makes you say that? " she said. She turned on me with big scared eyes, walking sideways, all twisted, her hair falling over one side of her face. " Die? Why? Why would he die? "

" Because he drank water," I said. " Water with worms in it. Out of a barrel. If you do that you die."

She laughed. Biff said I was only half sharp and Janey laughed at me, too, and I felt hurt and ashamed at what I had said. But the girl laughed again, longer this time, the sound almost happy, and then suddenly she ruffled her hand in my hair and said, " You'll do. You're all right. You keep me laughing, won't you? "

A few moments later we crossed the stream. It was only two or three inches deep there, and full of flat white stones, so that if you were careful you didn't get your feet wet. There were always sticklebacks there, and minnows that came darting out from under the shadow of the stones, and I remembered how once we had caught crayfish under a stone and didn't know what it was.

The first to go through the stream was Bonzo and then after him

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the girl. She went over with the same long springing strides as she had used all the way up through the fields and now she seemed as if completely unaware of the stones. She went straight through the water up to her ankles, slopping forward, her shoes oozing water as she climbed the bank on the other side.

" How much farther? " She turned and almost shouted at us, as if we were still some distance behind.

" You got your feet all wet," I said. " Look at your shoes—"

She didn't look at her shoes. Instead she looked up at the sky and I saw the sun shine flat into her large dark eyes, with their heavy under-bruises, and in the steely forks of the pins that she still hadn't fixed properly into her hair.

" How much farther now? " she said. " Is it far? "

" You can almost see it now," Biff said. " You'll see it when we get to the top of the field."

At the crest of the slope that went up from that side of the stream ran a line of hawthorn trees with cow-worn trunks, where that afternoon sheep were lying, panting in the shade. These trees cut off, until you got near enough to see through them, the view over the fields towards the bullock-yard, the stable, and the barn.

She reached the trees, with Bonzo, half a minute before us. She didn't seem to see the sheep, any more than she had seen the stones in the brook, and she went thundering under the trees without stopping, making the sheep stumble up on their knees and then herd away together, bunting and alarmed, disturbed by the dog, into deeper shade. After that we didn't try to catch her. By the time we got to the bullock-yard she had disappeared through the door of the stable, which was open now.

All I could see was the white shape of Bonzo, squatting on the threshold, a white splash that looked no bigger than a bird-dropping in the black covering shadow of the sycamore.

If it had seemed an hour or so while we waited by the pond for the man with the gun to move away, it seemed like a whole afternoon while we waited, sitting on the gate of the bullock-yard, for someone to come out of the stable and into the yard.

Once I thought of the man being dead from drinking water. I even thought I wanted him to be dead, so that Biff and Janey would know that I was right and wouldn't laugh at me. This idea began to take hold of me as I sat there, watching the white splash of Bonzo never moving in the shade of the sycamore, and once I said, " I think he's died. I think he's dead from the water."

" Oh, what the pipe! " Biff said. " Everybody's always dead with you. You always imagine things. And sit still. You'll make me drop my glasses. We shan't bring him next time, shall we, Janey? It'll be just me and you next time, won't it, Janey? "

" I think he's dead, too," she said. " If he's not, why is she so long in there? " After that Biff didn't say much. He went on huffily polishing his glasses over and over again, taking them off and squinting through them and putting them back on his nose.

Then suddenly I knew that Janey was frightened. She jumped down from the gate and started to walk away. " Let's hide," she said. " I don't want to see any dead people. They have their eyes open and they never shut them."

That was too much for me, too. I knew the man must be dead now, and I jumped down from the gate, too, and then Biff jumped down. Then we all looked through the bars of the gate but there was still nothing to be seen outside but the white shape of Bonzo in the open stable door, in the great dark shade of the sycamore.

" Where shall we hide? " I said.

We ran some distance along the cart track and then hid behind a bush of elderberry. We sat there for a long time without speaking, smelling the rank deep odour of elderberry stems, waiting for something to happen, and then Janey said, " I heard the gate."

A minute or so later the man and the girl walked past us, down the track. I noticed the girl had washed the blood from her arms and had combed and pinned her hair. Only a second or two later Bonzo came after them, ten or fifteen feet behind. The man was carrying the black oilcloth bag now and the dog seemed to fix his eyes on it, his nose close to the ground. With his other hand the man had taken the girl by the shoulders, and his hand kept moving across her shoulder, smoothing it down.

" Bonzo," we whispered. " Here. Good Bonzo. Here, Bonz, old boy—here." He went past us without looking at the elderberry tree, his eyes simply fixed on the feet of the man, the wet shoes of the girl, and the oilcloth bag. We whispered after him once or twice again but he took no notice and the last we saw of him was when he squirmed through the gap of the hedge and turned, following the girl and the man down the road.

" Come on," Biff said. " Let's see where they go."

Twenty minutes later we were standing on the high iron railway-bridge that spanned the single-track line at the little branch station on that side of the town. We had to wait about ten minutes for the signals to change for the train. During all that time the man and the girl, with Bonzo, stood on the platform, below us and about thirty yards away. I noticed they didn't talk much. Sometimes the man looked up and down the track in the evening sunshine. His face, I thought, didn't look so old any longer. It didn't look so grey and prickled and drawn as before. He smiled once or twice and once I saw the girl stare quickly down at the platform, biting her lips, rather as if she couldn't bear it if he smiled.

Then the train came in, making clouds of smoke as it went under the bridge where we were looking through the ironwork. By the time the smoke had begun to clear away, the train had stopped in the station, doors were opening and shutting, and in another moment the man and the girl were in the train.

Bonzo was alone on the platform. Biff put his fingers into his mouth and gave a quick sharp whistle and the dog looked up. It seemed, for a second or two, as if he had heard us and knew we were there. Then there was another whistle, this time from the

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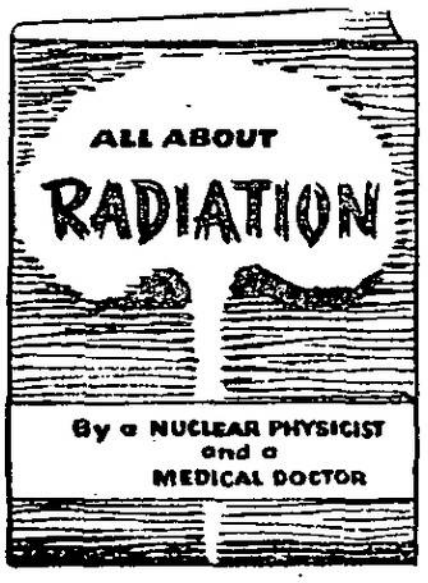

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guard of the train, and in another second the dog jumped into the train.

" Good old Bonz," Biff said. The train began to draw out of the station, its smoke dark yellow against the sun. " So long, Bonz."

" So long, Bonz," I said.

" So long, Bonz," Janey said. " Good-bye."

That night it was still light when I went to bed. It was hot in the bedroom and I was still excited. But I was not so excited about Bonzo, the man with the gun, and what a great and wonderful day it had been, as about another thing.

" You said you could die," I told my father, " if you drank water out of a barrel. But there was a man today, he had a dog named Bonzo and he drank water with worms in it and he didn't die."

" Go to sleep now," my father said. " Never mind about that. I didn't say that. I said *you* would die after it. That's all. Go to sleep now."

But I could not sleep.

For a long time I lay awake, staring at the summer sky as it darkened, pale yellow to orange and then to the dusky colour of the smoke from the train.

After a long day I was tired but not sleepy, and now I wasn't frightened any more. Now I knew that you didn't always die when you thought you would, and that after all, there was no need to be afraid. I began to think instead of the martin's eggs. We had four eggs. Biff had two, Janey one, and I had the other. In the morning I would make two pin-holes in my egg, blow it into a cup, and then hang it in my bedroom with a string.

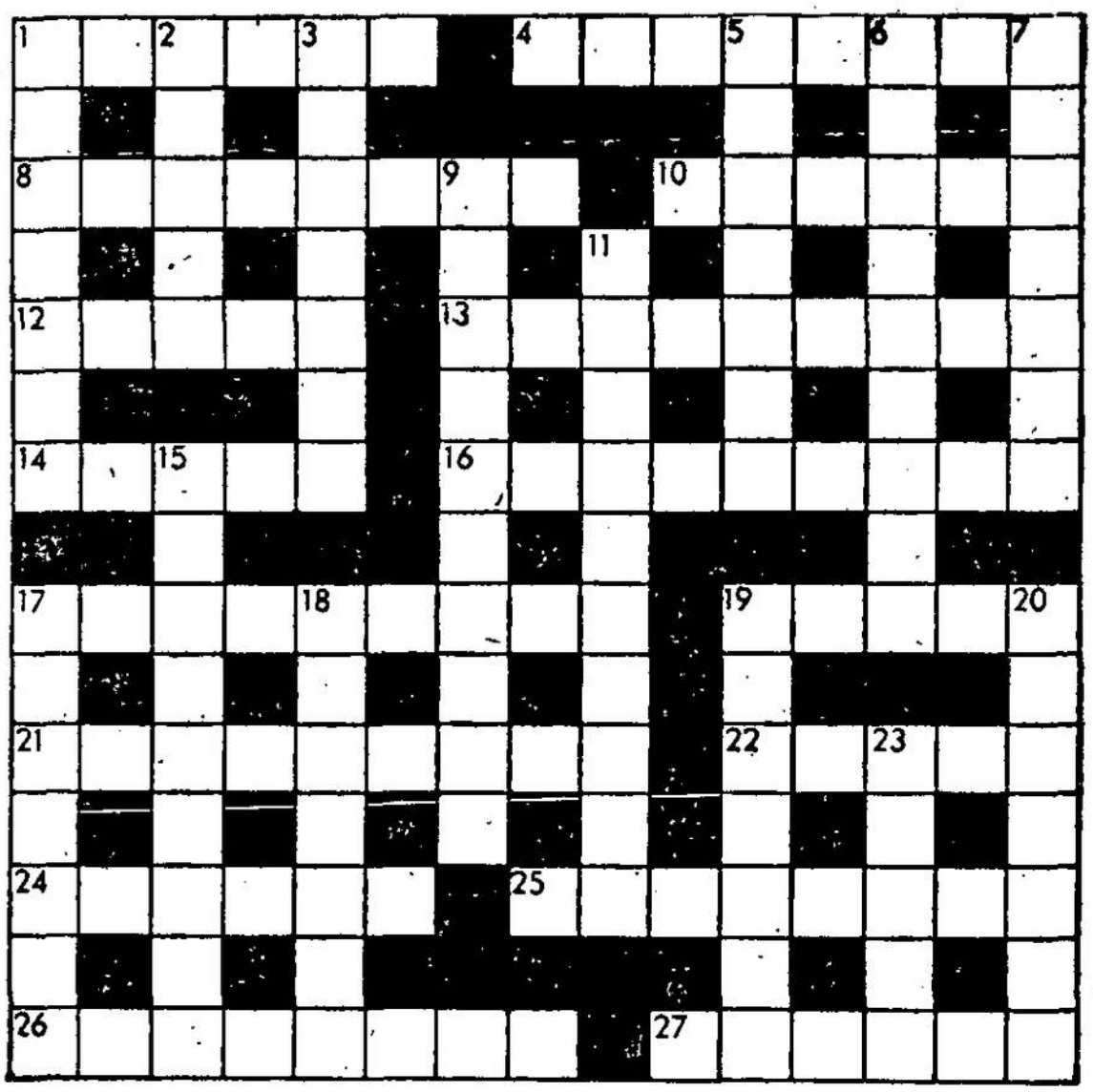
The thought of hanging up the martin's egg didn't even make me remember the man in the stable, and soon there was nothing between myself and heaven but the thought of Bonzo, the dark smell of elderberry leaves, the summer silence, and the stars.

ARGOSY CROSS-WORD

★

Solution on Page 96

★



CLUES

Across

1 Wilder colour (6).

4 Plant's more than a painful affection (8).

8 But not the moor-hen's mate (8).

10 Part of the neck contains a frill (6).

12 Might go off at a gallop in the Wild West (5).

13 Proverbially not one to change skin (9).

14 "And courage never to submit or——" (Milton) (5).

16 May contain children, plants, or fish (9).

17 Six hundred were not to (6, 3).

19 Ma's in the tar ! (5).

21 Heavenly polar ? (5, 4).

22 I do business, that's perfect (5).

24 Painter looks seedy (6).

25 Haste, it's in a vegetable (8).

26 Soon tidy ? It's a knotty point (8).

27 Little Edward goes to sea in comfort (6).

Down

1 Weep after operatic heroine in imitation (7).

2 A pennyworth of bread is comic (5).

3 It's a case in the end (7).

5 Rob mice for something smaller (7).

6 Metal for hardware, or for hard wear? (9).

7 Beyond limits ? Of course it annoys (7).

9 He should have a corner in chimneys (5, 5).

11 It was loveliest to Housman (6, 4).

15 Elm leaned; it's inlaid (9).

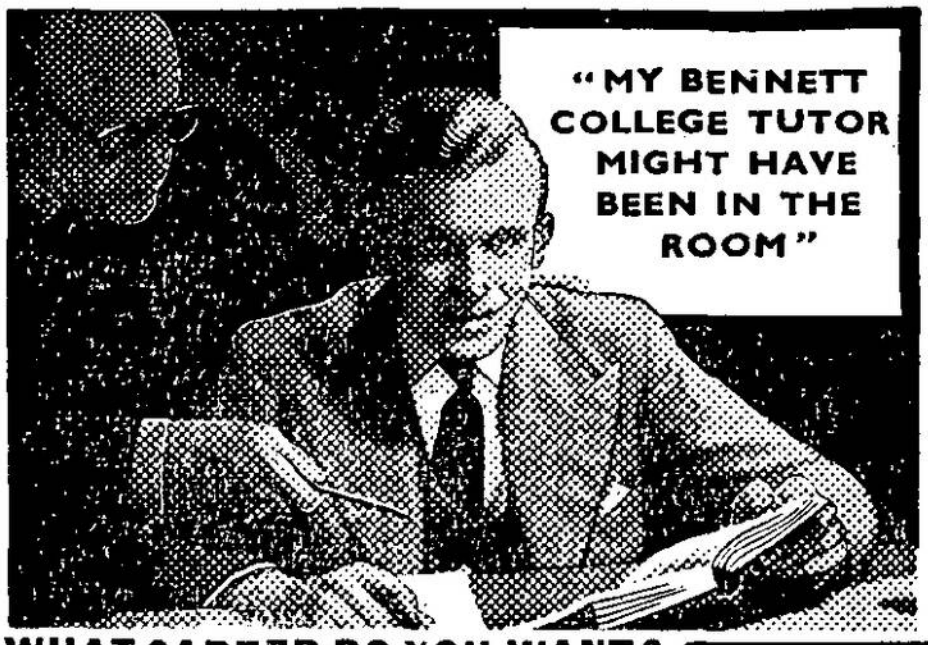
17 Army unit reduced to dieting (7).

18 Less rot in the stables (7).

19 Old ship, manned by three engineers ? (7).

20 Put down again ? No, passed on (7).

23 Little Victor's in to expel (5).



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